



# Michael Bent The Three Chambers



# The Three Chambers

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## Prologue

The Haunt was long overdue for a new victim.

Almost thirty years had passed since it had last made the headlines. In the thirty years since the unexplained incident of Julian Ashby, the locals had allowed themselves to think that The Haunt was now safe; that whatever it was that had given the place such a disturbing reputation, had now long since passed.

Twelve-year-old Julian had run away from home after an argument and camped overnight in The Haunt. The Police found him the following morning, stumbling around the park and mumbling incoherently about ghosts and monsters. For the next ten years, Julian lived under lock and key in a mental hospital where he finally died, having never fully explained what – or who - he had seen.

No-one was really surprised. It was just another episode in the growing legend that was The Haunt.

Hawkes National Park was located in the city of Horton, on the southern coast of Australia. Inside the park was a small secluded area that could only be accessed by trekking through a line of tall trees and bushes. On the other side of those trees lay The Haunt.

The hundred-metre long Haunt was bounded on three sides by impenetrable barriers. The western perimeter was an unclimbable vertical cliff face while the northern and southern ends were closed in by a wall of ancient trees whose branches hung down to the surface of the wide and fast flowing creek which ran through the park. There remained only one way in: through the eastern side and its border of trees and bushes.



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For well over a century, children and teenagers had explored The Haunt and played in its many nooks and crannies. During the 1960s it gained one new feature - the Great Concrete Pipe. For reasons no-one could ever remember, an enormous concrete pipe had been deposited on the banks of the creek. Generations of children since had played in the Pipe and decorated it with crayon drawings and graffiti.

The legend of The Haunt had its beginnings in the late 1800s. In 1870, Horton was still a tiny provincial town and The Haunt, just an unnamed curiosity, but in an age before the electric light, several farmers claimed to have seen light pouring out from behind the thick trees in the middle of the night.

The Haunt's fame first grew to prominence on a hot summer's day in 1885. On that day, a group of young people were seen running towards the as-yet-unnamed area with a few local residents in hot pursuit. However, when the townspeople finally burst through the line of trees, they were nowhere to be seen. There was no way out but inexplicably, they were gone. Those superstitious amongst them began the story that the place was haunted, and so it was The Haunt gained its name.

In the century that followed, The Haunt lived up to its mysterious reputation. Sometimes, decades would go by without a single disappearance or a solitary unexplained light or sound. But whatever was behind the power of The Haunt had not abandoned them.

*It was merely sleeping.*



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## Chapter 1: The Haunt

It was mid-summer in the city of Horton and the already hot morning had called the two boys away from their homes and into The Haunt. Ten-year-olds Benjamin Wallace and Thomas McNamara could never ignore a chance to enjoy time in the city's most famous 'weird spot'. There was always something *just not quite right* about it and naturally, this made it the best place to be.

However, in keeping with the legend, something was already wrong. For starters, the boys were alone. On a perfect Saturday morning in summer, The Haunt should have been playing host to dozens of children, but today there were only two – Ben and his best friend, Thomas.

That was the first clue.

What they couldn't have known however, was that time had finally run out. Whatever was behind the legend of The Haunt had decided that *today* was the day for it to wake up once again.

The boys had been enjoying themselves for an hour when suddenly, everything around them began to change. Despite the scorching sun overhead, freezing cold air appeared from nowhere and swirled around their legs and at the same time, the light began to fade. The Haunt was soon as dark as twilight – in the middle of the day.

But it was the total absence of sound which was the most mysterious.

"Thomas!" Ben shouted, even though his friend was standing right next to him. "Look at the creek!"

The fast flowing creek which ran through The Haunt looked just as it always had, but despite standing only a few metres away,



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they couldn't hear the usual sounds of water rushing over rocks - just silence and a distant whispering sound which might have been *anything*.

"Wha... what's happening?" whimpered Thomas, as he clung to his equally terrified best friend. His words were barely audible in the suffocating unnatural silence.

"I don't know," Ben cried back. "But I think we should get out of here!"

The boys took a few hesitant steps when suddenly, Ben stopped and whirled around.

"Can you hear that?" he asked.

"Hear what? I can hardly hear *anything*?"

"That humming sound! Can't you hear it?"

It took several seconds before Thomas could also hear the soft, barely detectable, hum coming from somewhere close by. It was noticeable only because there was nothing else to be heard. All sounds from outside The Haunt had been completely cut off and even within it, everything was muffled.

"I can hear it now!" Thomas shouted. "I think it's coming from over there - in The Hollow."

The Hollow was located at the far southern end of The Haunt. The trunk and branches of two trees formed an archway entrance into a naturally hollowed out section of thick bushes. The Hollow was normally a fun place but now, in the freezing gloom, it took on a sinister, even dangerous appearance. Despite the danger, Ben felt an inexplicable drawing towards the place. Something deep inside him was pulling him towards the hum – and whatever was behind it.



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Ben dragged his reluctant friend to the entrance of the Hollow and peered in.

“It still looks the same,” he yelled, although he wasn’t sure exactly what he was supposed to see.

As they stood silently watching, white fog began to ooze out of the leaf-strewn floor and to fill The Hollow. The fog remained trapped inside the play area as if there were an invisible door across the entrance and piled up until The Hollow was eventually filled to its leafy roof. It was then that The Haunt showed off all of its majestic - and terrifying - power.

The humming abruptly ceased and the fog began to spin clockwise around the entrance. Then, it began to glow.

Soft blue light appeared from deep within the middle of the fog as the spinning picked up speed. What was once slow and mesmerising suddenly became frenetic, even violent. Blue light shone out brightly from the maelstrom of spinning fog, filling the rest of The Haunt with its deathly pale colour. Suddenly, with a flash of light, the strange fog disappeared, and in its place stood a perfectly flat, slowly spinning blue disk.

Ben crept towards the disk and even though his mind was screaming to him to run away, he kept moving forward, drawn by an inner desire to get closer.

Suddenly, with a brilliant explosion of light, the mysterious dobject changed colour to a deep blood red. It began to spin at high speed and while the blue circle had appeared peaceful, this new one was violent and terrifying.

The two boys were only metres away from the spinning vortex when The Haunt abruptly returned to normal. The sunlight instantly returned, as did the warmth of the hot summer sun. Their



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cotton-wool ears could suddenly hear again, but one thing was very, very different. The angry-looking red disk was still there, spinning malevolently in the entrance to The Hollow.

The boys stood still, staring at the sight when suddenly, an object appeared *out* of the vortex – an arm!

The arm was completely covered in a coarse grey material and at the end of the arm was a hand, wearing a thick dark glove. For about fifteen seconds, the arm waved about and then, just as suddenly as it had appeared, it retreated back inside.

“Run!” Ben screamed to his friend. “Let’s get out of here!”

Thomas however, was already running towards the only place of safety he knew of in The Haunt - the Great Concrete Pipe.

“Is it safe yet?” sputtered Thomas hoarsely, from the shelter of the far end of the Pipe. His heart was thumping and all the colour had drained from his face.

“What are you asking me for? How would I know?” Ben shouted. Fear tinged every word. He was quiet for a few seconds before he looked at his shaking friend and drew a deep breath. “Okay! I’ll go and take a look. You just stay here!”

Ben crept along the length of the pipe and carefully peered outside. To his horror, he watched someone, *or some THING*, step out of the vortex. He flung himself back inside the Pipe, desperately hoping he hadn’t been seen.

“There’s something out there!” he stammered. “It came out of that... that... red thing!”

Thomas’s eyes went wide in fear. “I can’t stay here!” he shouted. “I’ve got to get out!”

“No! You’ve got to stay here until they’re gone!”



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But Ben's advice fell on deaf and terrified ears. Thomas leapt up and stumbled towards the entrance. As he jumped out of The Pipe, he collided with the creature that had emerged from the vortex and both Thomas and the grey-suited, helmeted creature were knocked to the ground.

The alien creature was first to his feet and backed away slowly and cautiously from the two boys, but he was no longer alone. Four other human-like creatures had emerged and were walking around The Haunt. They were all wearing astronaut-style helmets and thick grey suits that covered their entire bodies with two tanks on their backs.

It was hard to know who was most scared of whom. All five aliens rushed back to the vortex and stood motionless, looking intently at the boys. For thirty seconds, no-one moved or said a word.

It was a stalemate.

Ben took a single step forward and that was all it took to end the impasse. The strange creatures immediately jumped back through the spinning red circle of light and in a few seconds were completely gone.

Thomas half walked, half ran, toward the vortex before stopping mere centimetres away it. He hesitated just a moment and then calmly stepped through the alien portal and instantly disappeared.

"Thomas!" screamed Ben, at the top of his voice. He ran towards the empty patch of ground where his best friend had stood only seconds before. "Come back! Please! Come back!"

But Thomas did not come back.



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It seemed like hours, but less than a minute had actually elapsed before Benjamin Wallace, ten-year-old book worm and would-be adventurer, quickly made up his mind. He adjusted his thick glasses and took two steps forward – into the unknown.

Ben felt like he had been hit by a truck – but without the pain. His body spun violently and even with his eyes firmly shut, he could still see a brilliant red glow interspersed with white pinpricks of light. Five incredible seconds later, he stepped out of the vortex and onto the other side.

Freezing cold stabbed him painfully and he opened his mouth to scream, but no words came. The bitter atmosphere cut through his throat like a sword and he doubled over in excruciating pain. It was dark; it was icy cold and he couldn't breathe. His head was about ready to explode.

Ben searched desperately for Thomas. He knew that he had to find him before he passed out and they both perished. Eventually, he spotted his friend, lying motionless on the ground, not far from where he stood. With precious seconds ticking away until he keeled over to die, Ben grabbed Thomas and dragged him towards the vortex. The last thing he remembered before unconsciousness claimed him, was stumbling half frozen into the dreaded red circle, dragging the inert and probably dead, body of his best friend.

It was five minutes before he opened his eyes again. Thomas was half lying on top of him. The vortex was gone and The Haunt looked just as it always did – warm and sunny and completely empty of aliens and spinning portals.

“Thomas,” he whispered. “Are you still alive?”



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Thomas stirred and rolled clumsily off of him. "I think so," he replied groggily. He sat up on the grass and stared at Ben with a bewildered expression. "What happened?"

"You don't remember?"

"No, not really. I stepped through that red circle thing and then the next thing I know I was here lying on top of you! I guess I must've passed out or something..."

"Yeah, I guess so," Ben lied. He was not yet ready to tell Thomas what he had seen or that they had both nearly died.

"They must have been aliens, Scope!" exclaimed Thomas excitedly. "We're gonna be famous!"

Ben was very tall for his age, painfully thin and wore thick glasses. He reminded Thomas of a telescope. His nickname had been quickly shortened to *Scope*.

Ben walked over to a small object he spotted lying on the grass not far from them. It hadn't been there before. One of the *creatures* must have dropped it. He picked it up and brought it over to his friend.

"I don't think we're going to be famous, Thomas," he said, as he handed over the object. "And I don't think they were aliens either. Take a look."

It was a small rock hammer. As he turned it over, he read the inscription on the base of the handle.

Made in Canada.

"But they *must* have been aliens! What else could they possibly be?"



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Ben shrugged. "We can't tell *anyone* about this, okay? Everyone will think we're mental cases or something! Remember the Todd twins?"

It was a famous story from fifty years earlier. Ernest and Phillip Todd, fifteen- year-old identical twins, had claimed to have seen something strange in The Haunt. No-one had believed their story and they were ridiculed by the entire town, including their own family. Devastated by the experience, they ran away from home and were not seen again for another ten years until their bodies were discovered floating face down in the creek only metres from where Ben and Thomas now stood. The biggest mystery however, was that they were still wearing the same clothes they had on the night they had run away and their bodies hadn't aged – they still looked fifteen years old.

Suddenly, it dawned on them that they now knew the incredible truth about the Todd twins. Their story wasn't a lie, but at the same time they were not about to repeat their fatal mistake. They would not tell anyone else what they had seen. They also vowed never to discuss it again – even with each other. As far as they were concerned, *it never happened*.

Less than ten minutes has passed since the silence and cold had first descended on them on a hot summer's day in Horton. In those ten minutes, Ben and Thomas had been changed forever. They would never again treat The Haunt as just a playground. It was now a place of mystery, intrigue... and unspeakable terror.



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### Chapter 2: The Fight

Three Years Later...

Thirteen-year-old Ben half carried, half dragged his heavy school bag along the dusty footpath around the corner from his home. It was the first day of the new school year and he was now in year eight. Most years he would have been excited about a new year but not this time. The summer holidays had been one of the best of his life.

School was a lame comparison to camping under the stars with his family. When the sun went down each night, his father had helped him find many of the constellations with the telescope he had received as a Christmas present. He'd learned to put up tents and how to cook over an open fire. He'd even managed to catch a fish, although it tasted like mud.

When he wasn't camping, Ben loved to read. His first love was adventure books and he had finished reading all of his new novels within a week of receiving them. He had also spent many, many days riding around the neighbourhood with Thomas, running around in the park and racing up and down hills. He had built things, read piles of books, and watched scary movies late at night. It had been one the best holidays he had ever had and now it was all ending just so he could go back to school. It didn't seem like much of a deal to trade all of that for the regimen of boring teachers and stuffy classrooms.

There was however, one place the two boys *didn't* go – The Haunt. Just as they had promised, they had never talked again about that day nearly three years before. When they went to the park they would stand a long way off from the row of trees and bushes that bordered The Haunt and simply stare at it. Deep down, Ben knew that one day he would go back there – to that most special and



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terrifying of places, but for now, he felt much safer on that other, more boring side of the park.

Ben didn't hate school. On the contrary, he enjoyed it and was a good student, getting good grades in most subjects, especially in languages. It was just that nothing compared to spending time with his friends or family, or with his nose buried deep in a big book for hours on end where he could travel to other lands and share amazing adventures with spies and secret agents. And to make matters worse, there was the subject of Lizzy. Or, to give her full name - Elizabeth Margaret Bartel.

Lizzy was Ben's cousin and a thorough embarrassment to him in almost every conceivable way. A tomboy and fierce fighter, she had only just come to his school courtesy of an expulsion from her last one for fighting. She was thirteen, just like Ben, and he cringed in horror at the thought of being in the same class as her.

Please let her be in the other year eight class! She's a total lunatic! If she's in my class she'll be trouble and make a total mess of everything! I don't want anyone to even know she is related to me. Please God – keep her away from me!

Ben slumped around the final corner and spied his school - Blake Gardens Middle School. Sighing, he picked up his bag and prepared to take his last steps of freedom for another nine weeks. Just as he stepped inside the school gates, he heard a chant coming from behind one of the nearby buildings.

“Fight! Fight! Fight!”

Ben felt his stomach tighten and something clicked inside his mind. He dropped his bag on the ground and raced around the building to see what all the commotion was about. A large circle of boys and girls were standing around, continuing the chant.

“Fight! Fight! Fight!”



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Oh no! Please don't let it be Lizzy, please!

Ben pushed his way to the front of the circle and sure enough, right in the middle, he saw Lizzy, rolling around on the ground fighting with a boy. He recognized the other combatant as Christopher, one of the school's most notorious and vicious bullies.

"Lizzy! Get off him!" he shouted, shoving his way through the circle. He grabbed his cousin by the shoulders and with all his strength, pulled her off and dragged her away.

"What are you doing?" she screamed, as she fought back. "Let me go! I've nearly got him!"

Lizzy struggled, kicking her legs trying to get free but Ben grabbed her firmly around the waist and dragged her away from Christopher, who was just now getting to his feet.

"Brought your boyfriend here to save you did ya, Lizard face?" Christopher sneered, as he stepped closer to them.

"He's not my boyfriend, you big ugly moron! He's my -"

"Leave her alone!" interrupted Ben. He was not yet ready to let anyone know that they were related. "Just leave her alone."

"So four-eyes can talk hey?" spat Christopher, in Ben's direction. "Well, you just saved your girlfriend from a black eye – for today, anyhow!"

"Yeah right, whatever," replied Ben, feigning disinterest.

Lizzy finally stopped struggling and Ben released her. She stood still, fists clenched, staring furiously at her nemesis, looking for an opportunity to strike. Christopher had a nasty, almost savage, grin on his face. "You are one pathetic piece of garbage, four eyes, standing up for this... this..." and pointing at Lizzy, he added, "piece of trash!"



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"Teachers!" yelled someone, from within the gathered crowd. Instantly, the group dispersed in all directions. They made good their escape until there were just the three of them standing alone, as two teachers quickly approached.

"Saved by the bell," Christopher sneered. "I was going to pound *both* of you. Now that will have to wait until later!"

Lizzy took two steps towards him and looked him straight in the eye, just as the two teachers called out. Without taking her eyes off him, she launched a solid left handed punch straight to his stomach and the bully crumpled to the ground, winded and moaning.

One teacher grabbed Lizzy before she could inflict further damage, while the other picked up Christopher, who was still groaning rather theatrically. That was Ben's cue to leave and he quietly turned around and began to creep away, hoping vainly that no-one had noticed his presence.

"Where do you think you're going, Wallace?" one of the teachers asked. "You can come with us to the Principal's office and explain all of this!"

Ben shuffled self-consciously behind the two teachers, one of whom was half carrying the winded Christopher. The other was dragging Lizzy reluctantly by the arm.

Ben was mortified that he was going to the Principal's office like this, especially with half the school still watching him from a safe distance. The only time he had ever been there before was to receive an award for his language studies and never, *ever* for punishment.

A great start to the year this is! That stupid Lizzy! How could she get in a fight on the first day, before school even starts? Does



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she have some kind of death wish or what? My parents are going to kill me if I get in trouble. And Lizzy... she'll get...

Suddenly, a smile erupted across his face as he realized what would probably happen to his pugnacious cousin.

She'll get suspended! YES! Or expelled most likely!

Inwardly, Ben gave a whoop as he realized that his trouble-making cousin was probably not going to be at his school much longer. She'd only been at school for thirty minutes and was already in serious trouble.

Surely that has to be some kind of a record? It will be worth it, even if I get a detention! Lizzy will be OUTTA HERE!! YES! She's toast!

The three students sat down on the chairs that had been placed in front of the Principal. The two teachers remained, standing behind them, looking bored and disinterested. Mr Wainwright was a short, stocky man with deep blue eyes that were so piercing they could cut you in two. Christopher sat relaxed in his chair, almost smiling. He had been here before, and would be again. He knew the drill and wasn't worried in the slightest. Lizzy however, sat rigid, not from fear but from anger. Her eyes still blazed with an anger Ben had never really understood. She too was familiar with the Office – maybe not this one exactly, but she certainly knew the Principal's Office from her previous schools. They were all pretty much the same - they all spelt trouble.

The Principal sat still as the two teachers explained what had taken place in the schoolyard. In a deceptively quiet voice, he dismissed the teachers and then turned to face them. Ben felt like he was on trial and awaiting sentence.

The Principal's eyes bored into his head like laser beams and Ben was very uncomfortable. "I am disappointed to see you in here,



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Benjamin. I expect great things from you and frankly, I am not happy to see you being involved in a fight - even if you were just protecting your cousin."

At the word *cousin*, Christopher turned around and gave Ben a menacing grin. Ben's heart sank as he knew that his secret had just been revealed and of all people, it had to be to Christopher. The whole school would soon know his secret.

"But," he continued. "You know we have strict rules here about fighting. You should have gone to get a teacher rather than get involved yourself. You have one day's detention."

The Principal turned his attention to Christopher next with a look of exasperation. "What are we going to do with you boy? First day back, and already in a fight? You are on your last warning from me and you can spend a week in detention. One more episode like this and you will be looking for a new school. Do you understand?"

Christopher gave an unrepentant nod.

The Principal's full wrath however, was reserved for Lizzy.

"Miss Bartel. I must say I am *very* displeased with you. This is your first day in a new school after being expelled from your last one and how do you start the day? By getting in a fight! If this is how -"

"But he was calling me names!"

"Don't interrupt!" he thundered. "I don't care what the provocation was, there is no justification for fighting and especially for punching someone like you did. Now, may I continue?" He looked intently at her, daring her to say something back. Lizzy wisely closed her mouth. "If this is how you intend to conduct yourself at this school, then maybe I should just call your parents now and get them to pick you up and find another school for you."



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Lizzy opened her mouth once more, ready to interrupt, but one look at the Principal convinced her it would be a really bad idea and she cleverly decided to shut up. It was a wise decision. She had already learned through bitter experience, that arguing with Principals of any type was *never* a good idea. You only lose.

“Elizabeth, you can join Christopher in a week’s detention, but if you get caught fighting again, you will be out of here so fast it will make your head spin. And that goes for *both* of you. AM I UNDERSTOOD?”

The three students responded in unison. “Yes, Mr Wainwright.”

“Right then. Now that that’s settled, lessons have already begun. Christopher, you are in Mrs Martin’s class and Benjamin and Elizabeth, you are in Miss Price’s class. Now get going. And no dawdling!”

Ben walked sullenly to his new classroom alongside Lizzy. “Terrific, Lizzy! One day here, and you already get me into trouble! Thanks a heap!”

“Yeah, well, he was asking for it.”

“I know. But did you have to fight him today? First day of school and everything?”

“You didn’t need to stop me. I had him by then. I was beating him! I was clobbering him! And did you see him go down after the punch?”

Ben turned and looked at his tomboy cousin with her dirty face and tangled hair in a ponytail of sorts. Her new school uniform was already dirty and dishevelled, but he couldn’t help but give her one of his trademark grins. “Yeah, I saw. It was a pretty good punch,



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Lizard. It couldn't have happened to a more deserving person. But how about not getting expelled – at least for today?"

They opened the door to Miss Price's year eight room where the first lesson of the day had already been underway for ten minutes. Every eye in the room turned and stared at them as they walked in. Most of the class had witnessed the fight earlier. Several of the girls looked on with open admiration at the new girl who had tackled - and beaten - the bully of year eight. Sensing an opportunity, Lizzy bowed gracefully to her audience and the spontaneous applause of half the class.

"That will be enough class! QUIET!" roared Miss Price and the applause abruptly stopped. "Elizabeth, go and park yourself next to Sophie in the back row. But then again, maybe I'd better have you in the *front* row – where I can keep an eye on you!"

Ben silently made his way to the back of the room and slid into the empty seat next to Thomas, who had fortunately saved it for him, as he did every year.

Miss Price was not the favourite teacher around. Rumour had it she was ninety years old but Ben figured her for about sixty. She was short and lumpy and had a habit of wearing an assortment of clothes, mostly mismatched and at least two decades out of fashion. Matching socks were a novelty for her.

Ben stole a sideways glance at Lizzy, still dishevelled from her fight and then looked ahead at his new teacher. He closed his eyes, put his head in his hands and sighed.

It's going to be a long, long year!



## Chapter 3: The Door in the floor

The next three weeks of school were mercifully uneventful. Ben survived his detention and even received a little sympathy from his parents. Lizzy somehow managed to keep her fists to herself and despite Christopher's threats, he had kept his distance. He was in no hurry to fight Lizzy again. His reputation, even among his gang, had suffered greatly after being beaten-up by a girl. He'd never fought a girl who was so strong!

Ben's family lived in an old, but sturdy, stone house that was well over a hundred years old. He had often wondered about the people that had lived there before him and had imagined that at least *some* of them had been interesting. He considered his family amazingly boring and average, except for an old eccentric aunt. She had been married three times, and was once again divorced and roaming around Europe, searching for husband number four. Whenever he asked his mother about Aunt Lucy, she flatly refused to talk about the *family embarrassment*. The rest of his relatives were accountants, mechanics, clerks and even worse - a dentist! There was not a spy, commando or astronaut among their ranks. There was nothing very exciting at all about any of them.

Ben had explored his house and land countless times hoping to find buried treasure or evidence that kidnappers or foreign agents had lived there. Unfortunately, the only discovery he had ever made was an old black and white photograph which now hung on his bedroom wall.

It wasn't a photo of a secret map or of anything important or exciting. It was just eight average-looking people standing in front of an average house – the very house Ben's family now lived in. Since it was very old he thought it interesting enough to display. The way he had found it, however, was far more dramatic.



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Several years earlier, Ben had been jumping up and down in his bedroom trying vainly to reach the high ceiling, when suddenly his right foot broke right through the timber floor. The floor board was partly rotten, and as soon as he dragged his leg out and realized he wasn't going to bleed to death, he poked his head through the gap in the floor and peered around.

Just within reach of his outstretched arm he saw something interesting - an old, large, yellowed envelope. His heart skipped a beat! TREASURE! Once he had retrieved and opened the envelope however, he found it was just an old black and white photograph. It had probably fallen down through one of the many cracks in the floor sometime in the distant past. But it was still a find of sorts, and so he kept the photo taped to his wall to remind him of the day he fell through his bedroom floor. Ben's mother however, wasn't so thrilled. She shrieked hysterically at the sight of his blood-covered leg, and his head and arm covered in decades of dust and dirt. His father just shrugged and fixed the floor without much ado. He was always fixing something in the old house. Floors, walls, wiring, plumbing and even bits of ceiling that had fallen down one time in the kitchen.

Ben loved the house. It was a great house - even if it had absolutely, positively *no* treasure.

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Finally, it was the weekend again. Nothing quite compared to spending time away from the monsters that masqueraded as teachers or the irritations of sisters (or cousins).

"Ready to build, Scope?" yelled Thomas, as he dropped his bike on the grass. Today's project was to build a small cubby house for Molly, Ben's five year old sister. She had just started school that year and Ben was passionately protective of her, both at school and



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at home. Contrastingly, Thomas thought that *his* sister, Marie, was an insane monster that came from a parallel universe. She was fifteen, and the two of them fought like cat and dog most of the time. While Marie was lithe and athletic, Thomas was quite the opposite. They had absolutely nothing in common, other than their parents.

“Yep. We should be able to find some wood and bits in the shed,” replied Ben, as he jumped up to greet his friend. Together, they walked over to the large old fibro shed that stood behind the house. The shed was so ancient, it could even be seen in the old photo he had on his wall. They eventually managed to open the large, stubborn wooden door and stepped inside the dusty, dark and smelly building.

“You know Scope, this is a really great place!” exclaimed Thomas. “Can I take some of this stuff home? Do you think your dad would mind?”

Ben shook his head in amazement as he watched Thomas search through the old piles of books, broken toasters, old tools and furniture. He never understood his fascination with junk. What Ben called rubbish, Thomas and his father called treasure. Thomas’s own bedroom was filled with an astonishing assortment of bits and pieces, mostly scrounged from other people’s garage sales. He slept in an old steel frame bed to which his father had welded extra pieces to make it look more like a spaceship. That was another of his great loves – outer space. Every wall in his room was covered in posters of space, the moonwalks, galaxies and astronauts. What Thomas didn’t know about the Solar System simply wasn’t worth knowing. Models of the Space Shuttle and the USS Enterprise hung so low from the ceiling that Ben had to duck under them every time he entered his bedroom.



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“Yeah, I guess he won’t mind, but you’d better ask him. This is just junk anyhow.”

Thomas was distracted from their mission and began to ferret among the piles of old discarded objects, looking for more treasure. Ben however, went to the very back of the shed to look for some old window frames and timber off-cuts that he thought would make a great start on the cubby-house. He clambered over a pile of books and cardboard boxes and leant against the side of a large, heavy wardrobe.

“Thomas, help me pull the wardrobe out. I need a bit of space to get in behind it, so I can get the window frames.”

If Ben had a particular athletic skill, it was falling down or tripping over. He was a great deal taller than everyone else his age and despite his thin build, was exceptionally strong. His oversized feet however, combined with his general lack of co-ordination, often seemed to cause him trouble. Sure enough, as soon as the two boys began to push and pull the old wardrobe, the pile of boxes slipped and Ben plunged head-first down through the gap behind it. Instinctively, he thrust both of his hands out to protect himself.

“Arghhhh!” he yelled, as he fell.

“Scope, you okay?” Thomas asked, laughing at the sight of two long skinny legs poking out from the pile of boxes.

There was no reply.

“Scope?”

Still no reply.

All Thomas could see were Ben’s legs sticking up - and they were completely still.

“Ben! Talk to me! C’mon... You’re starting to scare me!”



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A few seconds later, Thomas heard a few faint words whispered from beneath the pile of junk. "I'm okay. But you have *got* to see this!"

"See what? What's there?"

"Can you move the wardrobe a bit more, so I can show you? I can't help 'cause I'm standing on my head. This is just amazing!"

"What's amazing?" Thomas cried out, in a frustrated voice.

"Just move the wardrobe and you'll see!"

It took about a minute of grunting and shoving before the wardrobe finally began to move. Just as it did, the pile of boxes and books shifted and crashed to the floor with Ben somewhere in the middle.

Thomas quickly helped Ben out of the pile and laughed when he saw his friend covered in dust and spider webs but Ben didn't care – he had something far more important on his mind.

"Help me get all this junk out of the way. I've got something totally *amazing* to show you!"

They threw books and shoved boxes to one side until the area behind the old wardrobe was finally clear, revealing an old concrete floor covered in decades of dirt and grime.

"Watch this!" Ben said, excitedly.

He placed both hands on a one-metre-square section of the rough concrete floor.

Nothing happened.

"Yeah what?" said Thomas, looking at his friend with a confused expression. "What's supposed to happen?"



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"It changed! I swear it did! The floor kinda melted and changed when I touched it!"

"Scope, I think you hit your head too hard." Thomas started to laugh. "Either that or your glasses are broken again. Concrete doesn't melt – you know that!"

Ben wasn't listening to him. He was busy putting his two hands on the filthy concrete square again.

"Come on, Scope. You were just seeing things. Grab the window frames and let's get out of -"

"Look!" shouted Ben, excitedly. "Look what's happening!"

Even as Thomas turned to look, the edges of the square suddenly separated from the rest of the floor. The surface then quickly changed from rough concrete to a smooth grey metal.

"Whoa!" shouted Ben, as his hands felt the cold, smooth metal mysteriously form beneath them. Ben quickly pulled his hands away from the floor. Within a few seconds, the metal had disappeared and the old rough floor had re-emerged. "What do you think this is?" His voice was quivering in excitement.

"Dunno! I've never seen anything like it ever, not anywhere. Try it again, but keep your hands there longer and see what happens."

"You sure? What if something blows up?"

Thomas simply shrugged.

With his heart beating fast from both fear and excitement, Ben cautiously put his hands back on the two front corners of the concrete section, just as he had done before. Once again, as soon as his hands touched the corners, the section turned into a dull metal square. Despite his apprehension, he held his hands there for about



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five seconds and watched, open mouthed, as the metal square began to rise slowly out of the floor with his hands still on top. It continued to rise until it was about twenty centimetres higher than the rest of the floor. The front edge began to lift up like a trapdoor. Ben pulled his hands back, but the trapdoor continued to open until it stood vertically, revealing a deep, dark black hole beneath.

"This is like Aladdin's cave," exclaimed Thomas. "Only creepier!"

Ben grabbed the small pencil torch he usually kept in his pocket and pointed it down the perfectly square hole. The thin light penetrated the inky blackness for only a short distance, just far enough for the boys to make out a narrow, steel ladder that led into the darkness below. Grinning at his friend excitedly, Ben whispered, "Are you game to go down with me?"

"Are you kidding? I'm not going down there!" Thomas shouted, as he jumped back from the mysterious shaft.

"C'mon, Thomas! This is an adventure! This is what we've always wanted!"

"You go down first, okay?"

"Sure! So, are you coming down?"

Thomas just nodded, nervously. Holding the torch carefully, Ben stepped onto the ladder. The metal rungs were smooth and very cold and looked brand new. He took each step slowly and could see that the walls of the tunnel were bare earth. After about ten steps the walls turned to smooth, almost polished, rock. When Ben pointed the tiny torch down, he still saw nothing at all. It was like a bottomless pit. He gulped, and continued his descent.

"Scope, this is starting to get freaky. How far down does this thing go?"



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Ben pointed his torch down the shaft once more. "I can't see how far yet," he called up to Thomas, who was descending just above him. "It must be a long way down still. I *definitely* need a better torch. You're not scared are you?"

"Nah! Just wondering how far it is to fall. I break easy you know." The previous year, Thomas had broken his leg when he fell off the roof at home. He had never explained exactly what he was doing standing on the roof, not even to his best friend.

About another forty steps down, Ben's foot finally touched the solid rock base of the deep shaft. He stepped slowly away from the ladder and pointed his feeble torch around to investigate his surroundings. There appeared to be a tunnel leading horizontally away from where they were. It too, was pitch black inside and they couldn't see more than a metre in front of them. Looking up, they could see the faint glow of the entrance to the shaft way above them. It suddenly seemed a very, very long way away.

"What is this place?" Ben whispered quietly, to no-one in particular. As their eyes adjusted to the dim light, Ben spied a triangular metallic object poking out of the smooth rock wall just inside the entrance to the forbidding, dark tunnel. He reached out and was about to touch it when Thomas suddenly grabbed his arm.

"Don't touch that!" he shouted nervously, making Ben drop the torch. "It could be electrified or something!"

As the torch hit the floor, the light flickered and died, leaving nothing but thick, blanketing darkness around them. Ben froze and was suddenly aware of just how cold and dark it was. He remembered the last time he was in a cold, dark place and the memory still terrified him.

"Now, I'm scared," whispered Thomas, in a soft, terrified voice. Ignoring Thomas' fears, Ben reached out slowly to where he



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remembered the metal triangle was located and carefully touched it. As soon as the tips of his fingers touched the strange triangle, it began to glow a soft pink colour. A second later, light slowly appeared along the tunnel in front of them. They looked up and saw the same kind of light filling most of the shaft directly above but there didn't seem to be any actual *lights* anywhere. It was as if the rocks themselves were glowing. However, the light was reassuring – no matter where it came from.

“C'mon. Let's see what's down here,” Ben said, pointing down the long tunnel in front of them.

“Are you sure that's such a good idea? What if we get lost?”

“If the tunnel splits we won't go any further, okay? Or, if you want, we could go back and get something to mark the way we came.”

“What if the lights go out?”

“Just stick close to me. If the lights go out, I've still got my torch. We'll be fine!”

Ben picked up the torch and they crept along the tunnel. As always, Ben took the lead. The tunnel was about two metres high and wide. Its walls and floor were made of incredibly smooth rock. The tunnel was also perfectly clean with no dust or dirt anywhere. Just like the shaft it looked brand new.

“This is like *Journey to the Centre of the Earth*, Scope. We must be at least six houses away by now. Who do you think made this place?”

“Sure beats me. I just hope they aren't here now,” Ben answered, without thinking.

At those words, Thomas abruptly stopped walking, grabbed Ben and pulled him around to face him. He stood on his toes, trying



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desperately to look straight into the eyes of his much taller friend. "Hey! I never thought of that. Maybe we should go back and get your parents or -"

"Are you kidding?" Ben interrupted. "This is *our* adventure Thomas! Just ours – no one else's. We could be famous for this! This really *is* Aladdin's cave – just like you said!" He looked at his friend, who was now shaking in fear. "Are you still with me on this? Are you staying?"

Thomas swallowed nervously. "If you promise I won't die down here, I'll go on."

Ben laughed, punched his friend in the shoulder and together they continued their slow walk down the tunnel. After about a hundred and fifty metres, the tunnel appeared to come to an abrupt end. However, once they actually reached it, they saw another tunnel off to the side, just like the one they were in, except that it was almost completely dark. There weren't any lights working in it at all. Turning on the torch, Ben led the way down the eerily silent tunnel. Thomas held tightly onto Ben's shoulder and crept behind.

"Hey! You're going to break my shoulder if you hold it any tighter!"

"Sorry. I just didn't want to lose you."

"It looks like there's something just ahead. I can almost see it."

Sure enough, in the gloom, they could see a faint, barely visible blue glow just ahead. They crept forward and the tunnel came to a sudden end just ahead of where they were standing. In front of them stood a large shiny metal panel two metres high and two metres wide. Down the centre of the panel were three large raised triangles similar to the triangular light switch at the



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beginning of the tunnel. Each of the triangles was glowing with a soft, dark and almost undetectable blue.

Not knowing what else to do, Ben stepped forward and carefully touched the top triangle with his finger for a split second, before pulling away again. The raised shape changed colour for a brief moment to a lighter blue and then returned to dark blue again.

"Maybe you need to push it!" suggested Thomas breathlessly, standing right behind Ben.

"Easy for you to say," replied Ben. "It's not *your* arm that's going to be chopped off if you're wrong!"

"Very funny!" said Thomas, looking nervously around in the dimness.

However, Ben did just as his friend suggested, and placed his hand firmly on the top triangle. As soon as he touched it the triangle changed to a light blue colour. Then he pressed it. The triangle moved inwards so that it was level with the surface of the metal. It also changed colour to a pale pink but nothing else happened.

"Try the next one," Thomas suggested.

Ben pressed his hand onto the centre triangle and pushed firmly. It too sank in to the level of the metal and changed colour to a pale pink. Still nothing happened.

"Bottom one?" Thomas suggested. His voice was crackling with fear.

"Okay, but if anything bad happens, run as fast as you can back down the tunnel and up the ladder. I'll be right behind you!"

"You won't have to tell me twice," he said. "Okay, push it."



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For the third time, Ben firmly placed his hand on the bottom triangle and pushed. Just like before, it depressed and changed colour to a pale pink but still absolutely nothing happened.

“Should I try *open sesame*?” quipped Thomas. Suddenly, they heard three loud clunks and the metal panel began to silently slide away into the rock wall. “It’s a door,” he whispered, stupidly.

“Of course it’s a door. But what’s inside?”

The door slid slowly away to the left and soon completely disappeared into the stone wall. There in front of them was a huge...

Black.

Nothing.

Ben and Thomas looked at each other wordlessly, asking the same question.

Should we go inside?

It was Ben who took the first step. He placed one oversized foot through the doorway, and then another, while Thomas followed closely behind. Another footstep and still he could see nothing.

“Can you see anything, Scope?” Thomas whispered.

“It’s pitch black in here.” Ben pulled out his trusty but puny, torch and was about to turn it on when out of nowhere, appeared *light*.

It was just like when they were in the tunnel. Light softly glowed out of the walls and the roof and in a few seconds, the room was completely illuminated in a brilliant white light. Ben took several cautious steps inside, stopped, and stared in wonder at the scene that lay before him.



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“Look at this place – it’s huge!” he exclaimed. He spun around, trying to take in the enormity of the underground room they had just entered.

Together, they walked around the huge, circular chamber. It was about twenty metres in diameter and had a high domed, metallic-looking ceiling. The walls and floor were made from a solid white marble-like material. The single outer wall was filled with desks, benches and cabinets but what really grabbed their attention was the collection of highly advanced computer-like machines and consoles in the centre of the room. There were about ten separate pieces of equipment. Some had computer style screens, while others had what looked like pieces of glass standing vertically above them. The machinery looked totally foreign and extremely advanced.

“Whoa!” exclaimed Thomas, who had wandered off to explore the room on his own. “Now *this* is something. This is fabulous! Come over here and look at this!” He was pointing to a particularly complex looking machine. “I wonder what this does?”

“I don’t know, but have you noticed that nothing is turned on?”

It was true. With the exception of the lights, nothing in the entire room was turned on or working. Every screen, every piece of equipment was totally and completely dead.

No sounds, not even echoes, could be heard - just their own voices and their shallow, rapid breathing. It was completely silent with the oppressive feel of a tomb. Thomas drifted back to Ben’s side, not wanting to be too far from his much braver friend. The suffocating silence had an eerily *familiar* feel to it.

“Maybe they just have to be turned on somehow? Let’s see if we can find a switch and –”



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“No!” Ben shouted, urgently. “Don’t turn them on! What if they’re dangerous? Or blow up or something? We don’t have any idea what any of these things do!”

“Yeah, okay.” Thomas replied, wondering just how dangerous a computer could really be. Thomas was a computer genius. When he wasn’t spending time with Ben, he spent many hours holed up in his room playing computer games and searching the internet for new games or for more pictures and information on outer space.

“This place looks brand new to me,” said Ben. “There’s no dust or spider webs or anything like that here.” He rubbed his fingers along the top of one of the machines and saw very little dust – certainly far less than he had in his own bedroom. All of the scary movies Ben had ever watched had old rooms covered in dust and spider webs. “So, I guess all of this must be pretty new.”

But deep down, he knew that that couldn’t possibly be true. There was only one entrance to this room that he could see and it came from inside his parent’s old shed and no-one ever went in there except to throw away more junk. Finally, he said out loud what he was thinking. “No. I’m wrong. No-one’s been here in years. I would have seen them if they had.”

“But Scope, look at all this equipment. It looks like pretty hi-tech, expensive stuff to me. Who would leave this kind of gear down here? And, how’d it get in here in the first place?”

Ben continued to stare at the dead screens and at what looked like computers. “Look at this scribble,” he said. He pointed to a set of squiggles on one of the machines. “I’ve never seen anything like this before.” It was all just strange symbols and odd-looking squiggles. None of it made any sense at all. “I think it’s writing of some sort - but I can’t really tell.”



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For several minutes they explored the chamber, trying to take in the magnitude of what they had found.

“Ben, look at all the controls on these machines. See all the buttons? They’re all triangles, not round.”

“Yeah, I noticed. Just like the light switch and the ones on the doors. Maybe they just liked triangles,” Ben suggested, shrugging his shoulders. He had already noticed that nearly all the controls and buttons in the room were triangular in shape, just as the light switch was at the bottom of the shaft.

Walking around the room, Ben came across a desk that looked very much out of place among the complex, ultra-modern machinery. Unlike the other strange alien-looking metallic benches and equipment, this was a very old wooden writing desk. Lying on its polished surface was a large, brown leather-bound book. Ben picked it up, opened it, and began to read. The first page was written in old, slightly faded ink...

July 10<sup>th</sup> 1937.

“Thomas!” he yelled, excitedly. “Come here. Take a look at this!”

Thomas came up behind him and started to read over his shoulder. “1937!” he shouted. “This book is ancient!”

“But, what’s it doing here?”

Ben flipped the first page and before him, written in old fashioned ink pen, was the beginning of the story.

We finally have everything working now. Xinth found the problems in the main power conduit and, at long last, all of our equipment is running. I am looking forward to finally getting out of here and back up to the surface. This place reminds me of the tombs of Antorak where I got lost as a child. That is definitely not a good



## The Three Chambers

memory for me. I have a number of theories about this planet's people and culture to check out and I will need to get among them to confirm it.

"This *planet*?" exclaimed Thomas, looking at his friend in awe.

"They must have been aliens," Ben exclaimed, "and they were living under my shed!" He was almost shaking in excitement.

"I always knew your place was spooky! Now I *really* know it!"

The local language is a delight to use, although mastering its grammar has been very difficult. Only Xinthia and Apak are not yet fluent, but as they have spent most of their time underground that is to be expected. The town we are living in is a small but growing community and I look forward to my first sanctioned exploration outside of the immediate vicinity. Lezmar is an officious and demanding leader but he seems to know what he is doing. This is his fourth off-world assignment. But I just wish he would burn his rule book! EVERYTHING has to be done just right and by his rules, and it is driving me insane! It's like being a child again listening to my parents telling me what to do. He even tells me what to wear! But I put up with it because he is in charge and like it or not, he really does seem to know what he is doing. His wife Hijnold is the only one who really likes him. The rest of us just tolerate him.

"What? Are parents the same everywhere - even on other planets?" Ben laughed. "My mum still tells me what to wear too. This Lezmar and my mum would get on pretty well I think!"

"I don't think so. He probably had two heads and eight hairy legs!"

"So? That sounds like my dad!" Ben chuckled, as he continued to read.



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Maybe by the time I have finished here, I will have the same credibility with the Council as he has. I am very lucky to be given this assignment. Many of my friends and colleagues were envious of me as it really is an extra-ordinary honour to have been selected for this project, given my young age.

I am using this old fashioned method of writing so as to get closer to understanding these people and the way they do things. It took some time getting used to using an old ink pen, but I enjoy the challenge. I never really liked the computer writing pads anyhow. Even the old writing desk we found in the house gives me more of a sense of understanding of this planet. It is just so primitive – and yet so incredibly satisfying.

“Who *are* these people?” Thomas asked, incredulously.

“I think the proper question is *where* are these people?” Ben replied, suddenly feeling very nervous. The suffocating silence of the room suddenly gripped him and the cold began to seep into his body. “Let’s just grab the book and get out of here, just in case. Okay?”

“Fine by me, Scope. This place is starting to give me the creeps anyhow!”

Clutching the journal, they ran swiftly out of the room and were soon climbing quickly up the long shaft. While the journey down had taken over fifteen minutes the trip back took less than ten.

As soon as they stepped out of the shaft, Ben grabbed the vertical metal door as he had done just thirty minutes earlier and it automatically slid slowly back into place. Soon, all that was left of the trapdoor was the old soiled, concrete floor. No gaps, no metal - nothing but dirty, rough concrete. The secret entrance was perfectly hidden and secure.



### The Three Chambers

"This is just too incredible, isn't it?" said Ben, still shaking from a combination of fear and excitement and the exertion of the long climb. They were back inside Ben's bedroom. He held the journal close to his body and stared at it. "This could be the most exciting thing anyone's found *ever*, anywhere!"

"Well, what do we do now?" asked Thomas. "We've got to tell someone about-"

"No we don't!" Ben shouted. "No-one can know *anything* about this. Don't tell anyone, not even your parents!"

"But there are aliens down there, Scope! There could be millions of them waiting to invade us and make us slaves or even eat us."

"Invade Earth? From my shed? Come on, Thomas, that's stupid! You've watched too many dumb space movies. Anyhow, there was no one else down there."

"Not now, but maybe they're coming back to eat us later," he replied, only half jokingly.

"Look, if we tell anyone else now, they'll just come in and take over and we'll never even get back in there again. And they won't tell us about anything they find either. We're just *kids* remember?" he said, sarcastically. "It's up to *us* to find out about this place – no-one else. This is *our* adventure!"

Thomas just stared at him blankly, and sighed. "You're probably right. Okay, fearless leader. Where to now?"

"I don't think you're going to like my idea."

Thomas was silent for a moment and then looked directly into Ben's face. "I think I know what you're going to suggest." His face was pale and drawn as fearful memories came flooding back.



## The Three Chambers

"I think we should ride down to The Haunt and take a look at this thing there," he said, pointing at the journal. "Maybe it will tell us something."

"But why there?" he whispered.

"Because I think this adventure started there - when we were ten."

"I don't want to go back there, Ben. Not after what happened last time!"

"I know you don't - and neither do I." Ben stood up and paced around his bedroom. "But we've seen aliens once before and now I think we've found their hideout. We can't just pretend these things aren't connected somehow."

"Aren't you afraid of going back?"

"Of course I am! But do you want to miss out on a chance for the best adventure of a lifetime?"

"Not really - as long as I don't die having that adventure!" Thomas answered. "You know, the first moment we found that room, I thought of The Haunt and what happened."

"Me too. It felt weird didn't it?"

"Totally weird. And scary."

Ben sat down on his bed next to Thomas. "You ready to go? Now?"

Thomas gulped and nodded. The next part of the journey would take place at The Haunt.



## The Three Chambers

### Chapter 4: The Journal

Ben and Thomas stood just outside the line of trees in the park. On the other side of the trees lay their destination - The Haunt. Ben clutched the ancient leather journal to his chest, took a deep breath and stepped through with Thomas close behind. They quickly looked around The Haunt and saw that there were no aliens roaming around. The sun was shining and hot and the only other children there were a few other boys throwing rocks into the creek and laughing.

The two boys walked over to their former favourite play area – the Great Concrete Pipe - and climbed in. They were alone in there.

“Do you feel a bit silly?” asked Thomas, as he breathed a sigh of relief.

“Maybe a bit,” Ben replied. “I’ve spent the last three years making excuses not to come back here.”

“At least we didn’t end up like the Todd twins!”

“Yep! We’re not crazy!”

“And we’re alive!”

“Yep. Two things to be pretty happy about!”

Ben held his breath and carefully opened the journal to the next page. He felt as if he were opening a hidden treasure chest. They were both anxiously awaiting its revelations.

“There had better not be Klingons in here, Scope,” Thomas said, excitedly, as they began to read. “I don’t like Klingons!”

*Kwary is waiting at home for my first report.  
I can’t wait to tell her how much I miss her, and*



## The Three Chambers

*what a wonderful and exciting place this is (when I am above ground that is). I love her so much, and it was hard to leave her to come here. But she said she would wait and so will I. When I return, I should have my pick of the home assignments, and maybe even a position in the capital. Then we can be Joined. The locals call it 'marriage' - a quaint custom that I have not yet observed in person. Maybe Kwary will consent to a 'marriage' rather than our traditional ceremony!*

"Please don't tell me this is a love letter," said Thomas, in disgust. "I get enough of that at home from my sister talking about her precious Darren. It's Darren this, and Darren that," he squawked, in a high pitched voice. "Yuk! It's enough to make me want to vomit!"

Ben turned the page and, to his disappointment, saw that it was not English but rather, a mass of symbols and meaningless squiggles. He turned the page again. Page after page was unintelligible nonsense. "It looks like a language of some kind. Maybe it's their own language," he suggested. "It could be the same language that's written on those computers. It sure looks similar."

"It looks like Klingon to me," said Thomas glumly, as Ben flipped through the pages, looking for something he could read. Finally he found some.

"Here's another page I can read," he said. "I wonder why there's only some in English?"

"Because the rest of it is invasion plans!"

"You worry too much, you know that!"

*August 2 1937*



## The Three Chambers

*I have just returned from my first overnight field trip to observe the immediate area. It was such fun! I slept under the stars, and found shelter with two local inhabitants who were camping outside as well. I think they called themselves hobos. I haven't slept outside for a long, long time – not since I went camping as a child in Parantha Province.*

*The people here are quite advanced in some ways, but very primitive in others. There are a lot of people here without employment. Many people have come to our house since we arrived to ask for work or money, or even food. We have tried to help as many as we can but our money is in short supply, although we do have plenty of food to give. Two days ago, I was shocked when some children came here begging for food. We gave them as much as we could. In return we asked them many questions about how children play and have fun. It is a surprise that people as advanced as these, still have children begging for food. This is something I must investigate further. Despite their poverty and hunger, the children seemed happy and smiled a great deal. It is perhaps something our children could learn from at home.*

*August 5 1937*

*My initial assessment of these people is that they have great potential. Lezmar disagrees with me – of course. We had a loud argument about it before I was put in my place by the others as the junior member of the team. Lezmar says they are a*



## The Three Chambers

*primitive and violent people, prone to war. As much as I hate to admit it, he may be right, although they are not as bad as he says. These people have a long history of war, and even now it looks like a new large war is developing. But our people have no right to judge. Our own history is just as filled with war and violence.*

*Still, I am beginning to love these people and their strange land and customs. Although I have been here only two of their months, I am thinking of asking Kwary if she would like to live here permanently. Lezmar would have my head on a pole if he knew I was even thinking this, and of course, the Council would probably never agree. But it is a delightful place to live just the same.*

*My room-mate Mexlar has gone missing the last two nights. He won't tell me where to just yet and has sworn me to secrecy. I do so enjoy a good secret! And anything I know that that old blowhard Lezmar DOESN'T know must be good! I think he'll tell me eventually. My guess is that he's seeing a girl. Lezmar would have a heart attack if he knew, but his secret is safe with me.*

"They don't sound very Klingon to me!" Ben said, mockingly.  
"Actually, they sound a lot like us."

"He's probably the only good one – the rest probably want to suck out our brains and eat them on toast!"

Ben laughed so hard, he snorted.

*February 2 1938.*



## The Three Chambers

*Xytskar has fallen very ill. It came on quickly overnight, and we are unsure of what the illness is or how it began. Our doctor has treated him, but he continues to get worse. He has been ill four days now. He went to the local's marketplace several days ago and we are assuming it is food poisoning, but to date we can neither confirm nor deny it. We simply don't know. And nothing seems to be working.*

*I think Apak is also ill, but he denies it to us all. I must confess to being a little concerned myself. Illness this far from home is a frightening experience, and even more so when our medicine and technology seems to have no effect. We dare not try local medicines which may do more harm than good. I hold out hope that the illness will run its course. We certainly need him fit and well. After all, he is our chief engineer.*

*Mexlar goes missing almost every night now for an hour or more. He still won't say where he is going, or what he is doing, but the smile on his face when he returns tells me all I need to know. He is lucky our shared bedroom has a tiny window that leads to the roadway without passing the others' bedrooms. Otherwise, he would have been caught by now. And that would have been a pretty ugly scene!*

*"That's my room!" Ben shouted. He poked the page several times, excitedly. "They were sleeping in my room! Mine is the bedroom with the tiny window! I can crawl through it and get out without*



## The Three Chambers

*anyone knowing. Just like when we lit those fireworks last year!"*

"That is so cool! You've had aliens sleeping in your room, Scope!"

"Well if you believe this, I've had a whole pile of them sleeping and living in my whole house!"

"Well, it was a long time ago, but still cool - very cool!"

"I bet you never had aliens in *your* room!"

"Well, I do have a sister you know!"

And so the argument ended in a draw. Thomas' fifteen-year-old sister, Marie, was the most unusual and inexplicable creature either of them knew.

"Find some more!" exclaimed Thomas, excitedly. "I want to find out what happened!"

*February 9, 1938*

*Xytskar died this morning. We are all devastated by this, but even more so by the fact that others of us are beginning to feel unwell too. Xinth and Herothin are now bedridden, Apak is in a coma, and we fear death may be near for him as well. The second site has three people ill too. The worst of all is that I now feel some of the pain as well. My joints are aching, and headaches are becoming more and more frequent. I haven't told anyone else, but there doesn't seem to be much point anyway.*

*Lezmar is considering a complete evacuation. I think that's an over-reaction to a bad*



## The Three Chambers

*situation. We should stay, but if any more die we will be forced to leave. There's just not enough of us to manage the base safely if we lose many more of our key people.*

*Mexlar told me in no uncertain terms that he would run away if the order was given to evacuate. Now, I KNOW he is seeing a girl. I wonder what she's like? And I wonder if he will ever get around to introducing me?*

*Ben flipped through more pages urgently, trying to find another one he could read. His head was spinning as he read the few pages written in English. He only wished that he could read the mass of entries in the alien language.*

*March 21, 1938*

*We are resigned to dying on this planet. Our distress signal has gone unanswered for five Earth weeks now, and no rescue ship has yet appeared. We had a meeting and decided not to risk using the TDG, despite the deaths. I disagreed with this and there was a pretty heated argument about it. But perhaps they are right. I don't know. And now, it is pretty pointless to argue about it. I was probably just behaving selfishly. But imminent death will do that to you!*

*There are five dead here, including Mexlar, who died quickly, and he is the one I grieve for the most. There are four dead at site two and the rest of us are ill. Not one of us is unaffected. As the*



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*youngest and strongest, I expect to be the last one to die. This gives me no comfort at all. But I will not die here – not alone in this awful tomb. I will walk the paths of this strange and beautiful land and find a place that I can call home forever. And there, I will die.*

*Final entry for Corizet, son of Melthix of Thanydib.*

Ben turned the page, but there were no more entries, just blank pages.

“They must be all dead now,” whispered Thomas. “That’s why we couldn’t find anyone. It’s just like in that old movie we watched – remember? You know the one? Where the aliens all die from something that doesn’t hurt us - but kills them? Maybe it was the water, or maybe it was air, or...”

But Ben wasn’t listening to him. He was pointing silently at two words on the last page. Then he spoke softly. “Site two! Thomas, he wrote about a *second* site. That means there must be another one of those rooms somewhere around here!”

“What? Another one?”

“Yep! Another room or tunnel, just like the one at my place!”

“Where do you think it might be?”

Ben grabbed his chin and tried to look thoughtful. “No idea, but I bet we can find out back in that underground room again.”

He looked straight at Thomas and said, “You always wanted to be a hero, Thomas. Here’s your chance!”



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### Chapter 5: Family Photos

Back once more in the gloom of Ben's shed, the boys marvelled at the transformation of the dirty, concrete square into an entrance to a strange and forbidding alien world.

"I can't believe you talked me into coming back down here," said Thomas, as he climbed down the ladder once again. "I've got to be crazy!"

"Well, at least this time we brought some decent torches," Ben answered, "so we can see where we are going."

"Well, that's a big improvement – now I can see the monsters *before* they eat me!" he replied, glumly.

They were soon down at the bottom of the deep shaft. Ben confidently pushed the small triangular button that lit the tunnel. The tunnel that had looked so scary earlier that morning didn't look quite as intimidating now that they knew what was at its end. Despite Thomas' fears, there were no monsters - no living ones at least.

Standing in the final dark section of the tunnel, facing the metal door, Thomas gulped and said, "I'll open it. I'm not scared of any dead aliens – only live ones."

He pushed his hand firmly against the top dark blue triangle, but unlike the last time, nothing happened. He tried the middle one, and then the bottom triangle. Again, nothing happened. The triangles didn't change colour or depress and the door didn't slide open. "This door hates me!" he exclaimed.

"Let me try," offered Ben. He put his hand on the top triangle. Instantly, it glowed a pale pink and he pushed it in. He tried the second and third ones, and the same thing happened. They stood



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back and heard the now familiar solid clunk, and watched the door slide open once more.

“It just likes tall people!”

Feeling more confident this time, they strode into the blackness, which automatically erupted with brilliant light. Once again, they were in the aliens’ lair.

“It doesn’t feel as scary now. Not when we know they are all dead,” whispered Ben.

“At least I’m not half expecting some hairy, spidery thing to come jumping out at me! I *really* don’t like spiders!”

“Nah! They must have been human-looking, because they lived here and no-one noticed anything. And people saw them, and talked to them too. Anyhow, let’s look around in these desks and see if we can find anything else interesting. And remember, we are looking for some clues as to where the second room is. The one the journal talked about.”

The boys opened several of the desks and benches and found very little of interest. Despite being alien, the furniture was unremarkable and very similar to normal office equipment. They found a few notebooks, but they were all written in the alien language, full of strange shapes and symbols. A few drawers yielded small devices that looked like handheld computers, but they were all turned off. Neither of them was ready yet to turn anything on – even *if* they knew how. They opened drawers and cupboards, lifted lids on containers, but found nothing that helped them in their quest whatsoever. Until...

“Found something, Scope! Look at these. They’re photos!” Thomas had opened a drawer that seemed to be filled with photographs, schematics and drawings.



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"These sure are weird photos," said Ben, flicking through the pile. "They're all colour - not black and white and grainy like old photos are supposed to be."

The photos were all quite large and they could see astonishing detail. "Look at this one," he said, holding up a photo of the city as it must have been many, many years before. It had been taken from one of the nearby hills. "You can see everything, even some of the old cars."

"Whoa! What about this one?" said Thomas, excitedly. "This is my street!"

He held up the photo and laughed. Instead of a street full of houses as it was now, all it showed was a long dusty road lined with old, large trees leading to a small, rundown stone farmhouse. "And there's the old ruin at the end of my street! Did that place *ever* look any good?"

A few minutes later, they came across a picture of an old house with eight people standing in front of it. Thomas stared at Ben in surprise as he held the remarkable photograph firmly in his hands.

"Scope! That's your place!"

Ben said nothing. He merely stared at the large colour photograph for what felt like hours before he stammered, "I've seen this before."

"What? You've seen the photo before? Where?"

"In my bedroom! That old photo I found a few years ago under my bedroom floor. This is pretty much the same one, only mine is black and white. But these are the same people. I'm sure of it!" He paused and then continued in an excited voice. "*These* are the



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aliens who lived here! Good grief! I've had pictures of aliens hanging in my room for years and didn't know it!"

There were hundreds of pictures, schematics and drawings and they separated them into three piles and methodically examined them. Most of them were boring pictures of the city and its people. While historians would have been fascinated with them, the boys weren't. If it didn't help them find the second alien chamber then they weren't really interested.

"Found anything yet?" asked Ben.

"Nothing that helps. Just pictures of people and old cars and some more of the aliens," Thomas replied. "Hang on. Here's another picture like the one in your room. It looks like some of the same people, but it's a different house."

Ben came over, stood behind him, and stared at the picture. It took only a few seconds for the awful, gut-wrenching truth to hit him with the power of a sledgehammer.

"Oh no!" he sighed, slumping to the floor. "Not there! Of all places! Not there!"

"Scope? What's up? What did you see?"

"I think I know where the other secret room is now," he answered, softly.

"Where? Do you recognise the house?"

"Yep. I sure do," he replied glumly, from his spot on the floor. "It's the worst possible place in the world! Why couldn't it be somewhere else - like a cemetery or a park? Why *there*?"

"Well? Where is it then? Don't keep the secret to yourself!"



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"It's at the Lizard's house," he answered, quietly. "My Cousin Elizabeth's house. I'd recognise that place anywhere. I've been there a million times."

"You mean the girl in our class with the fists and the mouth and –"

"Yeah, that's her! Don't remind me!" Ben spat, angrily. "Of all the places –"

"And you think that's where the other room is?"

"Unfortunately, yes. It makes sense to me. The other group picture is at my house and we have an alien room. This other picture must be at the second house. And look at them - I reckon five of the people in this photo are the same as the ones on my bedroom wall."

"Hey, Scope. Look on the bright side. If we get in a fight she'll be good to have on our side!"

Ben just sighed.

Why her? Why Lizzy? She drives me crazy! It's bad enough she's in my class at school without having to involve her in this adventure. She'll just ruin it! Or she will tell her friends!

But Lizzy didn't have any friends. No real ones anyhow. Her fists gained her admiration, but not friendship. Unknown to Ben, Lizzy counted him as probably her only true friend. Other girls her age were discovering clothes and makeup and boys. Lizzy was still trapped as a tomboy and a fighter. The other girls respected her – or at least her fists - but didn't really like her. She was not like them. The boys also respected her, but they were mostly scared of her – even more than other girls. Lizzy was a loner.

"So when do we go to see her house?" asked Thomas, enthusiastically.



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"How about tomorrow afternoon then? I don't think I could face her today! But I am not going alone, okay? You're coming with me. There is no way I am going there without backup!"

"I wouldn't miss it for the world! Count me in. Tomorrow! At the Lizard's house!"

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"What are we going to tell her?" asked Thomas, as they rode their bikes towards Lizzy's house the next afternoon.

"I'm not sure. I don't really want to tell her about our secret, but we might have to if we can't find it on our own." Ben was still unsure about involving Lizzy in their plans but he also realised that searching her house for an alien room probably wasn't going to happen without her involvement.

"Lizard's a pretty weird girl, you know," Thomas remarked. "She sure knows how to fight though!"

"Tell me! My mum's always saying how nice she is and all that stuff. But she is seriously strange. Like all girls huh?" he laughed.

Thomas grunted his agreement as they rounded the corner at the far end of Lizzy's street. "I hope her mum and dad don't freak about us just rolling up without warning."

"Her dad's pretty cool I guess, but whatever you do, *don't* mention her mum. It's a mega sore point."

"Why? What's up with her mum?"

"She's dead. She was killed in a car accident a couple of years ago, and Lizzy was pretty messed up by it. She was a head case for a while. As long as you don't mention her mum, it's okay. I heard my parents talking about it once. Seems Lizzy had this huge fight with



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her mum that morning and then Auntie Grace went off to work and got herself killed just near their house by another car. Actually, it was just about where we are now."

As if they both had the same thought, they abruptly swerved their bikes onto the footpath to avoid riding over the spot where Lizzy's mum had been killed two years before.

"Just let me do the talking okay?" Ben whispered, as he knocked on the Lizard's front door. A smiling, scruffy man in paint-spattered clothes appeared.

"Hello Ben," he said, looking at the two boys on the doorstep. "It's so nice to see you again. I haven't seen you around for quite a while. Come on in. I'm just doing a spot of painting in the kitchen. It's needed it for years now."

"Thanks, Uncle Leo. This is my friend, Thomas. Is Lizzy here? We just wanted to say hi and stuff, and see what she's doing."

"She's out in the family room. Just go on out, you know the way," he answered. "And thanks for coming to see us. It is a really nice thing to do. You are my favourite nephew you know." His face filled with an enormous smile, despite the white paint drips on his chin.

"I'm your *only* nephew, Uncle Leo!"

"Oh yes. So, you are..." he replied, with a chuckle. "Well she's out there now. *Enter at your own risk!*"

Ben and Thomas walked through the large, old and not-so-well-renovated house into an almost cavernous room. Lizzy was sitting on a rug in front of a TV playing video games and listening to loud music.

"Hey! Lizard breath! Whatcha doing?" he yelled at her, over the noise.



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Lizzy turned and faced them scowling. "What are *you* two doing here?"

"I... er... well I mean US... er... me and Tom thought we'd just come over and say hi, and see if you want to do anything today."

Lizzy turned off the video game and the music, stalked over to Ben, and stood on her toes, facing him almost eye to eye. She was the tallest girl in her class by a significant margin and almost as tall as Ben. It was just another thing that separated her from her peers.

"I thought you didn't want anything to do with me!" she yelled at him, accusingly. Anger glowed from her eyes as she continued. "You never talk to me at school, and you avoid me like I've got the plague or something." Her eyes softened, and Ben thought he saw a deep sadness there for just a moment before the anger returned. "And now, you just turn up expecting me to jump up and act like I'm your friend or something?"

"I'm sorry Lizard. You know how it is. At school and all I just don't want to get expelled or anything and well..." Ben stammered and didn't know what to say. Lizzy's green eyes glared even more angrily at him.

"We've got a secret!" said Thomas, suddenly.

"What's that, fat boy?" Lizzy snarled at Thomas, who backed away and stood behind his friend.

Sensing a possible confrontation, Ben quickly explained. "We've found something pretty interesting, and thought that you might want to help us check it out."

"What secret?" she demanded.

"Well if you shut up for a minute, and give us a chance, we can explain, okay?"



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Lizzy backed away and sat down on a rug, looking for all the world as if she were a boy. Her shoulder length brown hair was curled up and held inside her baseball cap and she was wearing boy jeans and an oversized top. Her face was dirty, and she had several cuts and scrapes on her arms.

Ben loved things neat and tidy, but his cousin couldn't care what she wore or how she looked. Her father had long since given up on trying to get her to look and act like a girl.

"I'm kinda grounded for the afternoon - again." She shrugged her shoulders, as if getting grounded was a common experience for her. Her anger had subsided as quickly as it had arisen.

"What did you do *this* time, Lizard?" asked Ben, almost not wanting to know.

"I got into a fight with the fat kid from up the road who kept stealing my football," she said, with a smile on her face. "I got these cuts from him, but he is gonna have a huge black eye tomorrow. You just wait and see! You need to come around in a few days and see it. It will be terrific!"

"Do you ever NOT get in fights, Lizard?"

Thomas was still standing behind Ben in case things turned ugly, but as Lizzy's temper cooled, his courage rose, and he eventually stood alongside his friend.

Ben was anxious to get started on their quest and didn't ask any more. Lizzy was always in fights, even at school. The story was always the same, and it always ended in tears – and usually for the other person.

"We've got a photo to show you," he said, and pulled out the large colour picture of the eight people in front of the house. "Recognise the house?"



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"It sort of looks like our house I guess," she replied, shrugging. "Is this the great secret? Coz if it is, it's pretty lame. Just some old stupid –"

"It's really old, you know!" said Thomas, butting in with an embarrassingly high-pitched excited voice. His voice had just started to break.

"How old?"

"Might be a hundred years maybe?"

"No way! Really? I don't believe you!"

"We're not sure exactly how old it is, but we do know it is at least seventy years old and probably more," said Ben, with a self-satisfied smirk.

"Where did you find it? My dad would love this, he likes collecting old pictures –"

"You can't show him," Ben whispered, urgently. "It's a HUGE secret. And I mean ENORMOUS, huge."

"Why? Where did you get it?" she asked, inquisitively. "Photos aren't exactly secret you know. Hey! You didn't steal it from somewhere, did you?"

"No. Well, not really. Er... NO, we didn't steal it! But we wanted to ask you about some things. Can we go outside? I don't want your dad to hear what I'm saying."

"You're not going to get me into trouble are you?" she asked. "Because I am already in prison for *another* week. Grounded all week! Can you believe it? Just for punching that weasel!"

Thomas rolled his eyes and silently shook his head. They were all in the same class at school and Lizzy had already built up



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quite a reputation. "You really shouldn't hit people, you know. It just gets you in -"

Lizzy threw him a look of disgust and disdain, and her fiery green eyes silenced him in mid-sentence.

The trio sat under the shade of a huge old tree in the backyard that had a large tyre hanging from it. Ben fondly remembered swinging with Lizzy many times in the years before it became uncool to touch a girl, even a close cousin. Although he would never admit to it, he missed those times.

"Okay. Tell me all about it," demanded Lizzy. "What's this so-called huge secret?"

"It's not a secret," stammered Thomas. "Not really."

"Yeah right!" said Lizzy, mockingly. "You're both so excited you're nearly wetting your pants waiting to tell me about it!"

Stupidly, Thomas quickly glanced down before realising what he was doing, and his face turned bright red.

"We were just wondering if you ever found any secret hideouts or anything unusual or weird around your house?" Ben asked.

"Like secret passages and treasure and that kind of thing?"

"Er... kinda, yeah."

"Nope," she said, leaning back against the old tree and belching out loud. "None at all. I've looked and looked a thousand times, but it's just a big old boring house like yours. But you have to tell me about that photo. How do you know it's so old, and where'd you get it?"



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She stared closely at the photo and said, suspiciously, "Are you sure this isn't some kind of a trick? Because if it is, I will pound you both into next week!"

The boys stared nervously at one another. Ben finally swallowed and said, "We found it in the shed in a bit of a... er... secret panel, so we wondered if you had found anything like it here."

"A secret panel!" Lizzy suddenly stood up. "Now you're talking! Come on, you've got to show me! But you've got to get me out of here first. You can get me ungrounded, Ben. I know you can. Dad thinks you are so *safe and respectable*." Lizzy spoke the last three words in a sarcastic tone. "He thinks the sun shines out of you, so I know he'd listen to you, if you asked him."

Ben wasn't so sure that *safe and respectable* was exactly a compliment, but he thought for a second, and then answered. "Okay, but you've got to keep all of this a secret. You've got to swear on the Bible, and on your mum's grave that you won't tell anyone! Okay?"

Lizzy winced noticeably at the mention of her mother, but nodded her agreement, and Ben went inside to seek permission for Lizzy's release. As it turned out, her dad was more than happy to let her go with them.

"But, *only* providing she doesn't get into any more fights. If she does, you must tell me. And you, young lady," he continued, pointing severely at his daughter, "any more unladylike behaviour and you will be grounded until you are twenty-one! Do you understand me?"

As the front door closed behind them she muttered under her breath. "I'm not a LADY!"



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Ben laughed, punched her in the arm, and added, "Lizard, you hardly act like a girl!"

\* \* \*

"So where's this secret panel?" asked Lizzy, as she stood outside the door to the old shed at Ben's house. "You said you found those pictures in a secret panel. So where is it?"

Ben looked silently at his friend, still trying to decide what to do.

"In here," he said, finally. "It's in the shed." He dragged the old doors open again and they were soon standing around the now familiar, and amazingly still filthy, concrete square. "Here it is," said Ben, pointing directly at it.

"This is it?" said Lizzy, indignantly. "A hunk of cement? Are you two trying to put one over on me?"

"Just wait, Lizard. You have *got* to see this!" exclaimed Thomas. "This is really awesome."

As soon as Ben touched the concrete in the right places, the transformation began to take place once more.

"Yikes! What is that?" she yelled, jumping back from the opening shaft.

"It's a stairway, and it goes a real long way down to an underground tunnel."

"Is there anything else down there?" she asked, suspiciously.

The boys looked at each other, smiled and answered in unison. "Aliens!"

Lizzy just looked at each of their faces and slowly and deliberately said, "You aren't kidding, are you."



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"Nope," Ben answered, "although there aren't any actual aliens down there now. It's where they used to be ages ago when that photo was taken. That's where we found it. Come on down and I'll show you. I'll prove it to you."

Ten minutes later, the three teenagers were wandering around the huge underground room. Lizzy was awe-struck. They stared at the dead equipment and wondered aloud just what the place was, and what had happened there so many years before. Ben showed her all the photos they had found and the journal, but just as she was about to read it, she suddenly looked up and stared suspiciously at the two boys.

"Hang on! What's going on here? Why are you showing *me* this? I know you're my cousin and all, but you," she said, pointing to Thomas, "*you* don't even *talk* to me, except to make some rude comment. So what's *really* going on? I'm not stupid, you know!"

Lizzy put her hands on her hips and stared at them defiantly. Ben realised then that his cousin wasn't as easily fooled as he had thought.

"Well Lizard, it's kind of like this. You know this picture?" Ben held up the old photo of Lizzy's house. "Those people are aliens and they lived in your house a long time ago too. Just like they lived here."

Lizzy's eyes opened wide in surprise. She was speechless as Ben picked up the leather journal they had read the day before. He opened the book and placed it on the desk in front of her with a satisfied smile. "This book talks all about it, and the alien who wrote it mentioned that there is *another* room just like this one. We're betting it's under *your* house, or at least real close to it."

"No way! I don't believe you!" she said, still stunned by the revelation. "Really?"



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"We think so. So we wanted to know if you knew of any secret tunnels, or anything you might have found already."

"No. Nothing like this. All I found was a small hiding place in the kitchen. That was pretty cool. I hid from my mum there plenty of times when I was little." She paused, and her face darkened for a second before continuing. "You really think there's something like this under my house?" she said, waving her arms about the large room.

"We think so and obviously, we need your help to find it. Do you want to help us? The book says that all the aliens are dead now."

"Are you kidding? I love adventures! Anything has to be better than sitting at home alone with Dad all the time. He's just too sad sometimes." For the first time in months, Lizzy's face shone bright with a large smile. "We might even find some alien bodies!"

"Bodies? Who said anything about bodies?" It was Thomas. His freckles looked even more obvious when he went pale with fright. "I don't want to see any dead Klingons, or any live ones either for that matter!"

"Well, you did say there were a heap of aliens, and they all died here, so their bodies have to be around somewhere."

"Hmm. I didn't think of that." Ben scrunched up his face, as he thought about where the bodies might be. "They could be buried in the garden. There's no ground down here, just rock." He tapped the walls for effect. It was true, the walls and the floor were all carved right out of a solid rock-like substance and were cold to the touch. They were smooth and in some places quite polished but they were very, very solid. No one was buried down there.

"Let's not go looking for bodies, okay? Let's just find the other place *please*?" begged Thomas.



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"You're such a wuss, Thomas," said Lizzy, with a scornful tone.

"Maybe, but I am a live wuss, and I want to stay that way!"

"So," Ben said, clapping his hands together. "We're agreed then. The *Alien Hunters Club* is officially formed! We can meet after school tomorrow at The Haunt. Then we can work out what to do from here." Ben enjoyed organising other people and was good at it. "It's nice and private and no-one will bother us there, but remember, no one can tell *anyone* on pain of death, what we have found. Lizard, you need to make up some reason for Thomas and me to come over, so your dad doesn't wonder why we're there. And Thomas, you need to make some excuse to come over to my place more often too. You could even sleep over if that would help. Okay - does everyone know what to do?"

They nodded and reluctantly left their new-found secret hiding place and crawled out back into the normal, but no longer boring, world.

They had a new mission: to find the Lizard's Secret Room.



## The Three Chambers

### Chapter 6: The Second Chamber

The next few weeks flew by, but their search for the alien chamber was a total failure. That is, unless you count \$1.15 in small change, seven pencils and two tennis balls as treasure.

“What are you three doing?” asked Lizzy’s father. The three Alien Hunters were downstairs in the cellar and had crawled into a narrow space underneath the rickety old stairs to continue their search.

“Nothing!” yelled Lizzy, in a muffled voice, as she struggled to crawl backwards out of the cramped space.

“Well, you look pretty strange to me!” he laughed. All he could see were three sets of legs poking out from underneath the stairs. “You do look rather silly, you know!”

As they crawled out slowly in reverse, he repeated his question, with a huge smirk on his face. They were all dishevelled, dirty and highly embarrassed. Ben’s normally unruly dark hair was covered in dirt and sawdust and was sticking out like a mad scientist’s.

“So, what were you all doing in there?” he repeated.

They looked at each other nervously, wondering what to say.

“We were just looking for secret tunnels, that’s all,” Thomas blurted out.

Lizzy gave him an elbow in the ribs and was about to say something when her dad interrupted.

“Oh! Forget about that! There’s nothing down here. And I should know. I’ve been over every inch of this place. I wish there *were* some secret tunnels,” he sighed. “A bit of buried treasure would make this run-down dump worth something. But... oh well...”



## The Three Chambers

As he retreated up the creaky stairs, Ben turned to Thomas and whispered accusingly, "You shouldn't have told him what we were doing. Now he knows!"

"Relax, Scope! He only thinks we are playing around. He doesn't know that there really *is* a secret passage somewhere around here." Thomas sat down on the cold brick floor and smiled. "My dad once told me that that sometimes telling a bit of the truth can hide your real intentions. So, I told him the truth – sort of."

They were silent for a few moments before Ben spoke. "I don't know quite what to do next." He sat down on the floor, looking dejected. "We've seen pretty much everything there is to see in this house, and we haven't found a single thing. How about we go back to The Haunt and see if we can come up with any other bright ideas?"

"Why there?" asked Lizzy. "What's wrong with right here?"

Ben tried to answer but couldn't find the words; Thomas came to his rescue. "The alien room is kinda spooky - and so is The Haunt. Maybe it will inspire us or something. Anyhow, it sure beats crawling around here anymore!"

Lizzy slowly shook her head side to side. "You boys sure are weird!"

But she was smiling when she said it.

\* \* \*

"The nineteenth meeting of the Alien Hunters Club is now called to order! All present and accounted for... SIR!" Thomas gave Ben a mock salute, before laughing and falling back against the inside of the Great Concrete Pipe. "Chill out guys! You two need a laugh!"



## The Three Chambers

Ben took one look at his friend's silly grin and pounced on him and began to wrestle. Never one to miss out on a fight, play or real, Lizzy jumped in, and soon all three were happy and laughing.

"We haven't found anything at your place, Lizard," Ben said, stating the obvious. "Maybe we were wrong, maybe it just isn't there!"

"But it's got to be, Scope," countered Thomas. "You saw the photo - we all did. The same aliens that lived in your room are in that photo of Lizard's house."

"I have a name you know..." whispered Lizzy, under her breath.

"But where is it then?" Ben was exasperated. "We've looked everywhere, and if I put my hands on any more concrete I'm going to scream!" Ben held up his hands. "I must have run my hands over every bit of concrete in the place by now. And Lizzy, your dad saw me once and he gave me this really weird look. Not that I can blame him. I must have looked like a mental case crawling around touching stuff everywhere."

Lizzy sat silently and bit her lip in concentration. "What if he's right, Ben?" she said, thoughtfully. "I mean, what if it isn't on our land... *now*?"

"Excuse me?" said Ben, in a puzzled voice. "What do you mean, *now*?"

"Let me explain." Lizzy sat down in the middle of the pipe and crossed her legs. "Our house is the oldest one around and all the other houses near us are fairly new compared to ours. I can remember my parents saying once, that the previous owner sold the back part of our land so they could build a new house -"



## The Three Chambers

"So, you're saying the alien chamber could be on *their* land now?" Ben interrupted.

"Why not? It makes sense, don't you think? Seventy or eighty years ago our land went a long way further back and the aliens might have built it under the back part. Anyhow, it's just an idea."

Ben sat down and thought through this new piece of information. "You could be onto something, Lizard! That really just leaves us only one thing to do. We need to get onto their land and check it out."

"How're you planning to do that?" asked Thomas. "We can't exactly just go up to them and say 'Hi, can we search your land for aliens?' ... We'd all be in a mental asylum before you could count to three," and looking at Lizzy, "But Lizard, at least you'd feel right at home in a padded room!"

"You look pretty well padded yourself, chocolate boy!" Lizzy replied, without any real venom.

"No. I've got a better idea," said Ben quickly, to avoid a real fight. He knew how quickly Lizzy got into fights and shot a warning glance at Thomas. "How about we go to Lizard's place after dark one night and climb the back fence. If it's late enough no-one will know we are there, and then we can have a good look around."

Thomas shrugged in approval.

"Sounds good to me," said Lizzy. "I'm ready whenever you are."

"Well, what about tonight?" continued Ben. "Thomas, you can sleep over at my house tonight if you want, and we can escape together. Then, we could meet Lizard in her backyard."

Ben lay back in satisfaction.



## The Three Chambers

Finally! We have a plan! It might not be much of a plan, but it's better than nothing. At least it will be fun, and way better than sticking my head into a heap of dirty cupboards and rubbing my hands on any more concrete! I just hope her dad doesn't catch us. That would be embarrassing!

\* \* \*

"C'mon, Thomas! Move your butt!"

Ben was standing right outside his bedroom window. It was quarter to twelve that evening. They had arranged to meet Lizzy at midnight, and were already running behind schedule. Thomas was the problem. He was struggling desperately to climb through the narrow window in Ben's bedroom without making any sound and had gotten stuck twice already.

"Don't wake Molly!" Ben whispered. "She's got a scream that can wake the dead!"

Thomas finally pushed his short, squat body through the narrow window. Just when he was almost through, he slipped and fell on top of Ben, who was standing underneath him trying to lend support. The two toppled over and hit the nearby rubbish bin which fell over and rolled away with a loud clatter. The sound echoed around the still air of the backyard.

The boys froze, not daring to even breathe. They waited, statue-like, for the lights to come on and then for the voices of his parents, but nothing happened. Ben was sure his heart was beating hard enough to be heard. After one of the longest minutes of their lives, they stood up and walked silently and carefully down the side of the house – the side that avoided the other bedrooms - just as an alien had done so many decades before.



## The Three Chambers

"You'd make a great ballerina, Thomas," said Ben, in a mocking tone, as they rode their bikes quickly along the dark streets. "You are just *so* light on your feet!"

"Hmmpf! Like you can talk! You trip over your feet a hundred times a day!" Ben was literally head and shoulders above his peers, but with that height had also come a chronic lack of co-ordination. It didn't help that he had enormous feet which frequently seemed to get in the way of each other. His mother just sympathised and said he had *growing pains* – whatever they were supposed to be. Ben often wished he was as cool and confident as some of the popular boys in his class. He would have traded some of his height for some *cool* any day.

"So anyhow, why's it so dark tonight?" asked Thomas, nervously.

"There's no moon, that's why. Don't you love it when there's no moon and it's all dark and creepy?" said Ben, excitedly.

"Not me! Give me daylight any time! Night time gives me the creeps. Monsters only come out at night - and so do aliens!"

It took only fifteen minutes to reach Lizzy's house. They dropped their bikes on the footpath outside the old, hedge-fronted house and crept silently along the driveway. They ducked under every darkened window, just in case someone was awake inside but it was unnecessary. The house was completely dark and silent inside.

As soon as they stepped into the backyard, they were immersed in a blanketing darkness. There had been some light at the front of the house that came from a dim street-light further along the road. The many large trees in the backyard however, blocked what little light there was. Even the stars seemed dim. Ben waved his ever-present pencil torch around the darkness trying to



## The Three Chambers

find Lizzy, who suddenly appeared out of the gloom behind them and tapped Thomas on the shoulder. He leapt away, and was about to yell, when Lizzy turned on her own torch and pointed at her face.

"It's only me, you guys! Where have you two been?" she whispered. "I thought you must have chickened out on me. I've been out here for twenty minutes!"

"Well, we had a few problems getting out," said Ben, pointing to Thomas who just shrugged in resignation.

"Well, come on then," she said, leading the way with her powerful torch. "I know the best place to climb the fence." She pointed the torch straight at Thomas' face and said pointedly, "I presume you can at least climb a fence without killing yourself, can't you?"

"Just watch me, Lizard face!" he muttered angrily, under his breath.

They crept silently around the trees until they came up to an old glass greenhouse just near the back fence. A number of the glass panes were broken, giving the greenhouse an eerie, abandoned look, especially in the dark. They stepped carefully around it, making sure not to trip over the old pots and containers that were littered about.

"Ben, hold my torch while I climb over."

Lizzy stood next to the old wooden paling fence and quickly and quietly scaled it. She peered over and whispered, with a satisfied grin, "And that, boys, is how it's done!"

"It's your turn now," said Ben, as he watched Thomas redeem himself from his earlier near-catastrophe. He climbed the fence without incident or noise, although not nearly as quickly or as gracefully as Lizzy had done. Suddenly, Lizzy's torch went out and



## The Three Chambers

the fence, the greenhouse and the whole backyard disappeared into the darkness. Ben immediately froze.

"Just thought I'd scare you!" laughed Lizzy, as she turned the torch back on.

"Turn it off!" whispered Ben, urgently. "Turn it off again and have a look back here!"

Lizzy turned the torch off once more, and the deep darkness returned. "Look there!" he said, pointing to the section of the greenhouse right next to him. "Can you see what I see?"

"There's some light in there!" Thomas whispered. "It's pretty faint but I can see something glowing."

"Come on you two, get back over here. Let's take a closer look at it."

They clambered back over the fence without difficulty.

"Where's the door to the greenhouse, Lizard?" Ben asked.

"Just down at the other end."

They walked slowly towards the darkened entrance.

"Look!" exclaimed Thomas, far too loudly.

"Shh, you idiot! Do you want everyone to know we are here?" whispered Lizzy.

"But look... the light has gone!"

Ben and Lizzy turned and looked back. Just as he had said, the soft glow from inside the greenhouse had disappeared. Ben stepped cautiously back to where he had been when he first noticed the strange light. As soon as he approached that spot, the glow appeared once more. It was so soft, it was barely visible. They would never have seen it, even in moonlight, never mind in broad



## The Three Chambers

daylight. Ben stepped away and the glow disappeared yet again. As soon as he returned, so did the mysterious glow.

"I... er... I don't understand this," he stammered. "It's kinda like down in the secret room, where the triangles glow when I touch them."

Lizzy finally broke the silence. "Come on you two, let's just look inside and find out what's going on. It's got to be a clue of some kind."

The thin, wooden greenhouse door creaked loudly despite Lizzy's efforts to be quiet. Every small sound, every creak, seemed to echo around the dark and foreboding backyard. Holding the torch in front of her, she crept slowly along the pathway through the half dead plants and bags of potting soil. The greenhouse smelt of stale earth and dampness.

"I can't see the light, Scope," whispered Thomas, as he crept up behind him.

"Me either. We might need to turn the torch off before we can see it."

When they reached the other end of the greenhouse Lizzy turned off her torch. They stood rigid and quiet in the penetrating darkness, barely daring to breathe and hoping that the mysterious light would reappear. They didn't have to wait long.

"There it is!" exclaimed Lizzy. "It's back!"

As their eyes grew accustomed to the gloom, the barely visible white glow emerged yet again from the soil.

"This is so weird," said Thomas, giving voice to all of their thoughts.



## The Three Chambers

"Tell me about it!" Ben answered. "Let's move these plants away, I've got an idea."

The eerily glowing earth had racks of plants and pots standing on top of it, and it took several minutes to move them all away. Soon, the bare dry earth lay before them, emitting an *other-worldly* glow of soft, white light. Ben knelt down in front of the dry patch of earth and put both hands firmly on it.

Nothing changed, except for two large handprints.

"Try somewhere else," Lizzy suggested.

Ben placed his hands all over the area hoping for a repetition of what had happened in his shed, but nothing changed.

"Come on!" he said, in a frustrated voice. "This worked at my place! It's got to work here!"

After several minutes of trying different positions, he put his hands in the dead centre of the ground. Immediately, the earth in front of them began to transform into a large, dull grey metal slab. The slab was about two metres long and a metre deep. Ben's heart was thumping in his chest, but he refused to remove his hands. Suddenly, the metal slab split into two equal halves, and then both halves lifted vertically, revealing the secret that lay beneath.

Lizzy pointed the torch into the gaping hole. They caught a glimpse of a wide metal staircase leading straight down a deep, dark shaft. The bottom of the shaft was not visible.

Ben turned and faced the others, who were still staring, open mouthed, at the imposing secret shaft. "Well, this is what we came for. We might as well go down and take a look."

"Are you sure we should?" asked Thomas. "It looks pretty creepy, and it's not like the one in your shed. It might have *live* aliens down there."



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"There are no live aliens down there!" objected Lizzy, forcefully. "I'd have seen something if there was. You're just getting scared! You're –"

"I'll go down first," announced Ben. "Just follow me - and watch your step!"

Neither Lizzy nor Thomas objected to him leading the way. As soon as Ben's foot touched the grey metal staircase, bright lights suddenly turned on from somewhere deep inside the shaft. Ben jumped back again in surprise, and the lights went out again.

"What's with you, Scope?" Thomas said, staring at Ben in amazement. "Every time you get near anything, a light turns on!"

"It's only a light," said Lizzy, impatiently. "Let's get going, or it will be morning before we even get there."

Ben stepped once more onto the staircase, and the bright lights returned. The light was so bright it spilled out into the greenhouse and into the backyard. Ben was silently thankful that no-one inside the house was awake to see anything.

This is weird! I almost knew this was here! I could feel something inside me turn over when we walked past it! I'm must be going insane! But at least I can see where I'm going this time!

"It's a long way down," said Ben to his friends, as they gathered around the entrance in the greenhouse. He had just taken his first step onto the staircase. "There's about six or seven flights of stairs, but it all looks pretty well lit. Just follow me."

The three stayed close together as they slowly descended each flight of stairs. The shaft was much, much bigger than the other chamber entrance. The walls however were the same as before, looking as if they had been carved right out of solid rock



## The Three Chambers

and, like the other, it also looked brand new. The staircase had no wear marks on it, nor was there any dust or dirt.

Lizzy looked around in stunned amazement. “I can’t believe this place is here and I didn’t know it! And it’s so huge! It sure is bigger than the kitchen hideout!”

What an understatement! Thought Ben. This is like discovering a lost tomb of the Pharaohs, and then discovering the Pharaohs were aliens! I just hope we know what we’re doing!

At the mere thought of the word *tomb*, Ben gave an involuntary shudder. There were still at least sixteen dead aliens around somewhere, and he was in no hurry to find them – dead or alive!

They walked carefully down eight flights of stairs before stepping out onto a wide rock landing, at the bottom of the very deep shaft. In front of them stood a large and now familiar object – a metallic door with three dark blue triangles on its surface. It was identical in every way to the door they had found in the first underground chamber.

“Well, this looks like something I’ve seen before!” said Ben, confidently, “and I even think I know the combination!”

Ben pushed his hand against the top triangle which instantly changed to pale pink. He depressed the shape until it was flush with the level of the door. He repeated the process with the other two triangles. About the only thing Ben was sure of in this amazing place was that pressing the triangles would open the door. Everything else was a total mystery to him.

The door opened with the familiar clunking sound. This time however, the room in front of them was not pitch black as they had expected - quite the opposite in fact. The room was already filled with a blazing white light which made them squint at first. It took a



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few seconds for their eyes to adjust to the blinding light, which seemed to be coming from everywhere... and nowhere.

"Wow..." said Lizzy, as she took in the sight before her. "Look at this place!"

"This has got to be the control centre I think," said Ben, as he spun around trying to take in the enormity of the cavernous chamber. "It's a *lot* bigger than the other place. And I thought *that* was huge!"

The second alien chamber was circular, but at least twice as wide and high as the first alien room they had found. The walls were a shiny silvery grey and the floor was the purest white they had ever seen. Ben touched the walls and they felt cold and smooth. Along the outside edge of the cavern were a number of other smaller rooms with glass windows and doors very much like offices or work rooms. The centre of the room was filled with strange and magnificent machines and equipment that were similar to those from the first room. The largest, and most obvious, apparatus was a metre-wide dark grey metal tube which went from the dead centre of the floor right up to the ceiling and into the ceiling above. Glowing rings were wrapped around the tube every metre or so. The light from the rings was pulsating, and there was a steady, but almost inaudible, hum coming from the huge metal tube. It was the only equipment that showed any sign of life. Everything else was cold and still - totally lifeless.

"This place is awesome!" shouted Lizzy. She was still spinning around, taking in the sight.

"But pretty creepy too," said Thomas. "It feels a lot like a hospital... Or a morgue!"

"At least it doesn't smell like one!"



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Ben stopped and turned to face them. "Actually, it doesn't smell like anything at all! Try it!" They each took deep breaths of the air. "I can't smell anything. I would have thought a place that hasn't been opened in all these years should smell old or musty, or something like that. This place smells like... nothing!"

"Maybe it has an air conditioner that's been working all this time," suggested Thomas.

"Perhaps," he replied, still unconvinced. "Let's look around, but don't touch anything until we know what it is."

As if I have any idea what any of this stuff does! I haven't got a clue! How could I? This place is just too incredible!

They explored the main chamber and the attached rooms for about thirty minutes. The equipment was very similar to the other they had seen in the first chamber with the alien writing and triangular buttons. They also found several books and notepads, but nothing in English – only in the incomprehensible alien language. It was in a large side room that looked like a conference room, that they finally found something they could understand.

"It's a map," said Thomas, stating the obvious.

"Of course it's a map," said Lizzy, sarcastically. "But look at what's on it!"

The metre-square plastic map was stuck firmly to the conference wall.

"There's The Haunt," she continued, pointing to the map "and there's some roads and –"

"What's this?" interrupted Ben. His fingers traced over a faint line on the map. "There's a line here," and looking even closer, "and another one, and... there's an er... it's a ... er... a triangle I think,



## The Three Chambers

an equilateral triangle! Yes! There's an equilateral triangle marked on this map!"

"That's not all," said Thomas, pointing at one of the corners of the mysterious triangle. "Look at the bottom left corner."

Ben peered at the map and soon saw what his friend had also seen. "That's where I live!" and quickly tracing his finger to the other corner, "And this is Lizard's house -"

"So... If these corners are our houses, then what is here?" Lizzy stabbed her finger at the top point of the triangle. "Is there another place like... like this?"

They were quiet for a few seconds. The three stared at each other as the incredible truth of their discovery hit them simultaneously.

"Another one? *Three* alien rooms?" asked Ben, incredulously. "There's three alien rooms?"

"It sure looks like it to me," Lizzy answered. "There must be three rooms. Maybe they are all connected in some way."

"Actually, it kinda makes sense in a way," remarked Thomas. "All the buttons are triangular, and it looks like the aliens do things in threes, so a third room would pretty much fit in."

"Could be, but anyhow I don't know this part of the city," said Ben, pointing to the general area. "I've never been there."

"I have," said Thomas. "It's where all the rich people live. My dad took me there once to see a client of his. Their houses are huge, and they've all got buckets of money. You could lose an elephant in some of those places!"



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Ben rubbed his chin in thought, smiled and said, "Grab the map and we'll take it with us and maybe we can find *that* place like we found this one!"

They continued exploring the huge chamber for another thirty minutes until they came across something else interesting.

"Hey guys! Come over here and look at this," said Thomas, standing in front of a solid, locked door without any obvious handle on it. Like most of the doors in the chamber, it had alien writing embedded in it. Attached to the wall next to the door was a rectangular black box with ten triangular white buttons poking out of it. Each of the buttons had a single squiggle on it. "What does this look like to you?" he asked.

"A combination lock!" said Ben, excitedly. "Well, at least that's what I think it is, and I guess those buttons have the numbers from one to ten. So, all we have to do is guess the right combination to open it!"

"Er... Ben," said Thomas, slowly. "Have you wondered *why* it's locked? Why is there a locked room inside a hidden chamber that no one knows about? It's got to be *very* important or even... dangerous!"

Lizzy threw a look of utter disgust at Thomas. "No-one's been down here for who knows *how* long. How dangerous can it be? I thought boys were supposed to be *brave*!"

"He's got a point though, Lizard," said Ben. "I don't think we should go messing around with that – at least not yet. Let's see what else is here first."

"Well I suppose there could be laser rifles, or money, or gold, or heaps of interesting stuff in there," Thomas said, his technology-loving mind getting the better of him. "Perhaps we could at least *try* and open it."



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Ben was silent and stood staring at the door, or more accurately, at the alien writing written on each of the ten enticing shapes. Then suddenly, for just a moment, the whole world disappeared – except for the writing. The only things he could see were the ten triangular buttons and the single alien squiggle on each. He stood transfixed, his eyes and his mind totally engrossed with the writing.

“Scope? What’s up?” asked Thomas.

Ben didn’t move a muscle. He was completely still and unresponsive.

“Hey Ben! Wakey, wakey!” said Lizzy, punching him gently in the arm.

Ben suddenly shook his head and yelled. “Look at the time! It’s nearly two o’clock in the morning! If we don’t get home soon we could get caught, and I sure don’t want to explain to your dad why I am visiting *you* in the middle of the night!” He screwed up his face at the thought and shuddered. “Grab the map, and let’s get out of here!”

They ran out of the room and climbed the long staircase as fast as they could.

“It sure was easier going down,” panted Thomas, lagging behind the others. The staircase was the equivalent of climbing an eight storey building. Ben was fit and strong and Lizzy played a lot of sport. Thomas however, spent a lot of his time in front of his computer or watching TV. He was not built for such strenuous activity.

As they drew near to the top they were momentarily stunned to see that the entrance was closed but as soon as they approached, it opened automatically, and they stepped through, back into the glasshouse.



## The Three Chambers

"I feel like Alice in Wonderland," said Lizzy, in genuine amazement. "We've been down the rabbit hole!"

"We'll be Alice in the Doghouse if we don't get back home soon!" said Ben. "Let's meet after school in The Haunt. Then we can work out what we are going to do next."

The boys were soon safely back in their beds but neither slept a wink for many hours. Thomas talked excitedly for some time, trying to imagine who, or what, had built the amazing chambers. Ben however, stayed awake and mostly silent because something was disturbing him. Something wasn't quite right, and he didn't quite know exactly what it was. All he knew was that for a brief moment, he had thought he could *read* the words on the mysterious locked room.

*Am I going mad or did I really read it?*

These two thoughts kept him awake for most of the night.  
Both terrified him.



## The Three Chambers

### Chapter 7: The Assignment

“Mr. Wallace! Are we keeping you awake?”

The stern voice of Mrs Wyndham cut through Ben’s daydream like a knife.

“No, Mrs. Wyndham,” he replied, with a still half sleepy expression.

“Then maybe you can tell the class what I was just saying?” The Social Studies teacher put her hands on her hips and glared without blinking at Ben, daring him to try and guess what she had just said.

“I... I don’t remember.”

“Well, for your benefit, *Mister* Wallace, I was telling the rest of the class who *weren’t* sleeping, about this term’s assignment.”

Ben inwardly groaned, but kept his glazed eyes open and semi-focused. He tried hard to fake interest.

All I need now is another horrible assignment from the most boring teacher in school! I’ve got alien rooms to find and explore! I don’t need this right now! Doesn’t she know I’ve got better things to be doing?

“This term you are to find out as much as you can about our local area. You need to find out about the mayor, the sportsmen, the important events and the history of this area as well as anything else of importance. You can use the library, the internet or perhaps even try talking to some of the older people who have lived here for a while. Find out about any areas of historical importance. And don’t forget next week’s excursion to Martha’s Flat. There’s a lot to learn there that you can use.”



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Ben was finding it hard to concentrate. The room was hot and stuffy – the air-conditioning was malfunctioning yet again - and the teacher's voice droned on and on and on. Mrs Wyndam was his least favourite teacher. Just staying awake in her class was a challenge. And to make matters worse, he had vastly more important things on his mind, and absolutely none of them were related to school.

\* \* \*

"What a day!" said Thomas, as he threw his schoolbag into the Concrete Pipe and jumped in on top of it. "I thought year eight was supposed to be easy! That's what Mum keeps telling me."

Ben and Lizzy were already there waiting for him.

"Lizard, let's take a look at the map." Ben asked, impatiently.

She carefully unrolled the large alien map that they had taken from the underground chamber, and began to study it. Lizzy had demanded that *she* keep the treasured alien artefact since it was found near her land.

"It's a lot different from what the city looks like now," Lizzy said. She pulled out a tattered road map of Horton City and compared it to the alien one. "There's lots of new roads and the city is much, much bigger now and -"

"We only care about right here," interrupted Ben, pointing at the top of the faint triangle. "This is our next step -"

"Hey! Maggot face!"

Lizzy peered out of the pipe to see who was shouting at them.



## The Three Chambers

"You talking to me, Franklin?" sneered Lizzy. Unafraid of any combatant, she stepped out of the pipe clenching her fists tightly and stared intently at the boy. Ryan Franklin and his friend Elliot were swaggering towards her.

"I sure am, maggot. I still owe you for this black eye!" he said, accusingly. He pointed to the large black colouring around his left eye.

"Who are they, Lizard?" whispered Thomas hesitantly, from inside the pipe.

"Franklin's the idiot I gave a black eye to a few days ago," she whispered back, never once taking her eyes off the approaching pair. Despite the warning, Lizzy had gotten into yet another after-school fight, only a few weeks after the incident with Christopher on the first day of school. As usual, Lizzy has beaten the boy soundly, but this time he came prepared with backup.

"Well, come and get another one if you aren't too scared!" taunted Lizzy. "I can give your other eye one if you want! It'd look good on you!"

The two boys came close and stood in an intimidating stance on either side of Lizzy. She was not afraid of them - she was not really afraid of anyone. She slowly moved to be in a better position to defend herself against the two bullies. Just as they began to close in on her, Ben stepped out of the pipe. Ryan and Elliot had not realised Lizzy was with anyone else. At 185cm tall, Ben was an imposing sight to the two, much shorter boys and matched with Lizzy, who was also exceptionally tall, they were quite a sight.

"Who are you?" demanded Ryan, rudely. He was not intimidated by the taller boy. His face bore an angry and ugly scowl.



## The Three Chambers

It unsettled Ben to see such anger and venom. It was even worse than Lizzy's angry face.

"Lizzy's cousin! What's it to you?" Ben was quite calm and relaxed. He was only annoyed that they had interrupted their important meeting. It took a lot to ruffle him.

The two boys backed off slightly just as Thomas also stepped out. Thomas attempted to look brave and tough, but he made sure that he was well behind Ben, just in case there was any real trouble.

"Why don't you two just go and leave us alone," Ben said, dismissively. "We're busy doing other things."

"Like what? Playing with dolls?" Franklin retorted.

Ben just ignored him. He was very much like his mother; he wasn't easily upset or intimidated. He grabbed Lizzy firmly and dragged her back into the pipe.

Realizing they were outnumbered, Ryan and Elliot had turned and begun to skulk away when Lizzy broke Ben's grasp, leapt out and yelled, "Cowards!"

In a flash, the battle began. Ryan rushed full speed at Lizzy but before he reached her, Ben stepped in the way and with a quick and powerful shove threw him sideways to the ground. Elliot ran around them and headed towards Lizzy. She quickly sidestepped her slower, dim-witted assailant and as he passed her, launched a solid punch to his stomach. Elliot went sprawling on the ground groaning from the pain and sucking in breath.

Ryan Franklin was furious. The girl who had given him a black eye had beaten his friend. He jumped up and launched himself at her once more, but he wasn't the only one who was furious. Ben had had enough. He was angry at Lizzy for starting the feud weeks



## The Three Chambers

before, but he was livid at the two boys for breaking up their all-important meeting.

“ENOUGH!” he yelled, angrily.

Ben reached out and grabbed Ryan’s arm and spun him around just as his fist flew out trying to punch Lizzy. He twisted him around until he was facing him. Ben had never been in a fight before. He always preferred to avoid such problems. He had always walked away – until now.

He grabbed Ryan’s shirt and lifted him upwards - and upwards. In a few seconds he was holding him up, well off the ground and looking *up* at him. Ryan’s feet swung uselessly in the air and fear coursed through his veins.

“LEAVE... HER... ALONE!” Ben shouted, right into the boy's pale face.

And then he threw him. With a gigantic effort he threw the helpless boy several metres to one side. Ryan landed with a solid thud and lay there stunned for a few seconds.

“Get out of here!” Ben shouted. “Now!”

Elliot had already taken off as Ryan picked up his bruised and battered body and ran, stumbling several times, out of The Haunt. Lizzy opened her mouth to yell something to the fleeing boys, but Ben clamped his hand over her mouth and pushed her forcefully back into the pipe.

“For goodness sake Lizzy, SHUT UP! Can’t you just leave it alone?”

He took his hand from her mouth, but it was Thomas who spoke. “Look what you did!” he exclaimed, pointing in the direction



## The Three Chambers

of the fleeing boys. "I can't believe what you did! Lizard, did you see what –"

"Come on, Ben!" she exclaimed, ignoring Thomas. "Let's nail those two bozos! They're scared of you! The two of us can beat them easily! And the way you chucked Franklin so far! We'd make a great team, you and me!"

Ben sat down, deliberately folded his arms, and stared at her.

"Well come on..."

Ben remained silent until Lizzy finally stopped talking.

"You're a lunatic, Lizard! You know that? Why do you want to get in a fight with them? They were all ready to walk away, and you had to make it worse."

"You heard what they called me!"

"So what? All of your fighting is going to get you in big trouble some day!"

"You sound like my dad," said Lizzy, grumpily. "He's always saying that too."

"Well, maybe he's right! Lizard, we're on the edge of making the biggest discovery in the entire history of the world. Why do you want to go and fight some stupid boys instead?"

"Yeah, well, so what's wrong with that?"

"You can already beat any of the boys at school – you know that. Why do you think there were two of them? *They're scared of you!* You won! So just leave it alone – we've got bigger things to do!"



## The Three Chambers

Lizzy sat quietly, looking at the two boys with fire in her eyes. A few seconds later she slumped back against the inside of the pipe with her head in her hands. "Well, thanks for standing up for me anyhow..." she muttered, and then looking directly at Thomas, "Both of you."

Thomas's face went red and he quickly turned away.

"Now, can we get back to the map, everybody?" said Ben, in an exasperated tone. He did not want to discuss what had just happened. He had never been that angry before in his life, and he had certainly never picked up anyone almost his own size and thrown them like they were a rag doll. The anger – and the strength – scared him.

"What do we do now?" he asked, desperate to move on. "We can't just do nothing. There's another alien room out there, and we sort of know where it is."

"I've got an idea that might work!" said Thomas. He sat down and excitedly detailed his *Great Plan* to find the third room. He pointed to the map and said, "See where this top point of the triangle is? I say we ride over and find out what's there now. The map calls it Poindexter Street, and we should be able to locate which house it is pretty easily. At least I think so. The map looks pretty accurate to me."

"Sure, that's the easy part, genius," added Lizzy, sarcastically. "But what do we do when we get there? Are you just going to walk up to the front door, and ask them if we could go searching for alien rooms on their land? They're going to think you're crazy!" She sat back and sighed loudly. "After all I already think *we're* crazy, and I've been down there! What's anyone else going to think?"



## The Three Chambers

"She's got a point you know," Ben added.

Thomas just smiled, and continued. "Don't you see? If it's on this map, and the house is still there, then it's a really old house. And remember our Social Studies Assignment – 'To find out about the history of some of the area'? Well, we go to the owners of the house, and tell them we want to find out about the history of the house, and then ask if we can look around. So what do you think?"

The other two looked at each other with thinly veiled disgust and amusement.

It was Lizzy who finally spoke. "That's the dumbest thing I've ever heard, you dope! They won't let us through the front door! And what if the house has been knocked down, and what if we get in trouble for even asking? They'd probably call the cops and we'd get arrested! My dad would be just *thrilled* if I got arrested, you know! He already half expects it – he's told me so."

Lizzy bowed her head for a few seconds as she briefly remembered the many arguments and fights she had been having with her father – fights she rarely had when her mother had been alive.

"Well, have you got a better idea, Lizard breath?" Thomas retorted, angrily.

For the next couple of minutes the two argued, trading insults more than ideas, until Ben finally shut them up.

"Why don't we just ride there now? What have we got to lose? At least it's a plan of some sorts, and it's better than sitting around here waiting for you two to bash each other's brains out!"

Thirty minutes later they were standing at the imposing iron gates of an enormous whitewashed stone mansion set on a huge



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parcel of land at the exact place the map pointed to. It had to be the correct place as there were no other houses near it and the block of land was enormous. A high, thick hedge fronted the property, and behind the front gates, a long winding driveway divided the manicured lawns and led up to the front of the house.

"That's going to be hard to get inside," stammered Thomas, in a masterful piece of understatement.

Ben and Lizzy stared at the size of the mansion in front of them. A few minutes later, Ben broke the silence.

"I've got an idea! Do you see the gazebo?"

"The what?" asked Lizzy.

"The gazebo! See that round thing in the middle of the lawn over there," he said, pointing through the gates to a large wooden structure with a roof, but no walls.

In years gone by, it would have hosted musical bands for large gracious parties, but now it was vacant and looking a little worse for wear. It had obviously not been used in many years.

"The two alien rooms we have found so far haven't been in our houses themselves, but in buildings near the house right? One was under my shed and the other in your greenhouse. So I'd bet that the third room is right under there!"

He pointed triumphantly towards the tired-looking gazebo.

"S... s...so how do we get there to find out?" stammered Thomas, half fearful of the answer.

"I thought you'd never ask!" Ben had another of his huge infectious grins plastered on his face. "Here's my idea!"



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### Chapter 8: The Gazebo

"I don't know why I let you two idiots talk me into this," whispered Lizzy to Ben and Thomas, as they wheeled their bikes quietly up to the gates of the forbidding mansion. It was just after 1am, and they had once again escaped their homes unseen by parents.

"It's too late to back out now," answered Ben, with far more enthusiasm than either of his two friends could muster. "I'm *positive* it's there. I just know it!"

"But why come here in the middle of the night?" protested Thomas, with an edge of fear to his voice. "It's creepy out here. And I'm cold!"

"Don't you remember Lizard's greenhouse? We could only see the entrance in the dark. Well, I'll bet it's the same here. And anyhow, night is the only time we won't be seen."

While they were talking, Ben found what he hoped would be there – a gap in the thick hedge that they could wedge themselves through. The house was completely dark and Ben slowly pushed his tall, thin frame through the bushes until he found his way through to the other side. Lizzy followed soon after, but Thomas's portly frame became firmly wedged. Grabbing an arm each, Ben and Lizzy pulled until their stuck friend flew out and they landed in a heap on the wet lawn. They didn't even dare to breathe in case they were spotted, but no lights came on. In any case, they were still at least a hundred metres from the house. No one had heard them – they hoped.



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“Follow me,” whispered Ben confidently, as they crept silently towards the dark gazebo, feeling conspicuous in the low moonlight. The damp lawn muffled their footsteps as they crossed the large open area between the hedge and the decrepit gazebo.

They crept slowly around the wooden structure, staring intently at the ground hoping for some glow or sign that they were on the right track, but nothing appeared. Several more trips around were just as unfruitful.

“Maybe it's underneath?” ventured Thomas, suddenly wishing he hadn't mentioned the idea.

“There's a piece of wood hanging loose on the other side,” suggested Lizzy. “We might be able to get under it through there.”

The main floor of the gazebo was about half a metre off the ground. Wooden planks were nailed around the edge to hide the gap between the floor and the earth below. The loose plank was fortunately on the side facing away from the house.

Ben gripped the plank and slowly pulled. The one remaining nail holding it in place suddenly creaked. The sound was like a gunshot in the middle of the still, cold night air and they instantly froze. After thirty nervous seconds, he grabbed the plank and pulled once more. This time, the plank came away without a sound and he carefully laid it on the ground next to the gazebo. Turning on his pocket torch, he peered inside and saw nothing but dirt, weeds and timber supports for the structure above.

“Well, this is what we came for,” said Ben, and he slowly slipped underneath the structure, closely followed by Lizzy.



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"I'll be on lookout," whispered Thomas nervously, looking around at the dark and forbidding house and grounds.

It seemed to Thomas like hours, but after ten minutes Lizzy and Ben came back out looking disappointed and very dirty.

"Nothing," said Ben, disconsolately. "I was *sure* it would be there. I don't understand. I was so sure. I don't know where –"

"Scope!" interrupted Thomas, urgently. "Look!"

He pointed his shaking finger towards a small cottage next to the main building where a light had just come on. As they turned to look, a door opened, and a man appeared, silhouetted in the bright light.

"You! What are you doing there?" he shouted angrily, waving a large stick. He began to move slowly towards the intruders.

They turned and ran as fast as they could towards the gap in the hedge. Thomas didn't worry about the branches tearing his skin as he forced his way through the barrier that had given him so much trouble earlier. Wordlessly, they grabbed their bikes and pedalled as fast as they could, not even looking back to see where the man was.

The old man shuffled out of his cottage and slowly and painfully made his way towards the gap in the hedge. Pointing his torch around the ground, he soon spied something on the ground. It was a student ID card.

"Gotcha!" he said, triumphantly as he shuffled slowly back to his little cottage.



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### Chapter 9: Miss Florence Victoria Oleander-Smythe

Ben was terrified when he awoke the next morning. His terror didn't ease when he was at school either. Any minute he expected the police to pounce and arrest him for trespassing, but after a week without incident, he finally began to relax.

I don't think the man saw who we were, thank goodness! That was the stupidest thing I've ever done. Think Ben, think! You can do better than that. There's got to be a better way to find out what's there without getting caught!

The abortive gazebo affair had spooked Ben and Thomas badly. Even Lizzy wasn't too keen to try again, but the question of how to get back onto the mansion's grounds again was soon answered – in a very unexpected way.

Two weeks later, when returning from school, Ben spotted an immaculate silver Rolls-Royce parked out in front of his house. Knowing that none of his family or friends could afford such an expensive car, he was naturally curious and strolled up to the car and peered in. He was greeted with a scowl and a dismissive wave from the decidedly unfriendly driver, who was dressed in an old-fashioned chauffeur's hat and coat.

"Ben!" his mother called out, as soon as he opened the front door. "Come inside and meet our guest."

As soon as he walked into the living room he spied his missing student ID card. It was lying on the coffee table and his heart sank. Suddenly, in a moment of clarity, everything made perfect sense. The expensive car, the old lady sitting on the couch and the angry chauffeur outside. The colour slowly drained from his face.



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*I'm dead! She's going to call the police! Or worse – my parents are going to kill me, and then she'll call the police! Why did I have to drop my card there of all places?*

Ben had noticed the morning after the gazebo expedition that his ID card was missing, but he hadn't thought much of it, as he often misplaced it. He looked at both his mother and the silver-haired lady and was pleasantly surprised that they were both quite happy, and in fact, smiling. It didn't seem much like an execution to him - at least, not yet.

"Ben. This is Miss Oleander-Smythe. She's come to return your ID card. You didn't tell me it was lost."

"Er... er... I didn't know it was gone," he stammered. He was desperately trying to cover up the fear that was steadily growing inside of him. His blood was ice water in his veins.

"Where are your manners, Ben? Thank Miss Oleander-Smythe for coming over to return it."

"Thank you, Miss Oleander," he replied in a stilted voice, as he waited for the hammer to fall. He knew that she was teasing him and making his pain last longer, before she finally revealed the truth.

"Thank you, Benjamin. It is so nice to see you *again*. You must have dropped your card on the footpath outside my house. It was just fortunate that my driver found it." Her voice was steady and cultured, and her bright eyes stared unblinkingly at him. She knew what had *really* happened, and they both knew it. It was pure torture – and the strange old lady was obviously enjoying every single minute of it.

Ben swallowed, and didn't know what to say.



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"What were you doing over there anyhow, Ben?" asked his mother. "That's a long way from here and you know I don't like you riding too far away from home."

"I was, er... well Lizzy, I mean Thomas, and me were, you know..." He stammered again and his face began to turn red.

"Mrs Wallace," the old lady interrupted, politely. "We often get young people coming over to take a look at the house. It's a large house and very old, and very famous. It's quite an attraction really, and I often have people stopping to take a look and to take photographs. Some of them even think it's haunted!" She laughed softly and then turned her head to look directly at Ben. "I am sure young Benjamin just wanted to see for himself if the stories were true. Children seem to take quite an interest in such ghastly things. I know that I did when I was a child!"

Ben didn't know what to think. Was she letting him off the hook, or setting him up for a big fall? It was all very odd – and very confusing.

"Benjamin, you and your friends should see the place at night when it's dark sometime. It's *much* scarier then!" she said, with a big broad smile. Ben wanted the floor to open up and swallow him. He didn't know how much more of this charade he could take.

"Thank you again for your hospitality, Mrs Wallace," the old lady said, standing up to leave. "It's been lovely to get out for an hour and meet you and your delightful son and daughter. I don't get out much now, and I rarely receive visitors anymore."

Ben and his mother accompanied Miss Oleander-Smythe to the car. Just before getting into the stately vehicle she turned to Ben



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and said sweetly, "Benjamin, I'd love to have you and your friends over for afternoon tea tomorrow. Would you like to come? I am sure you would find the house much more interesting on the inside."

"Er... I don't know. I'm not sure," Ben replied, looking desperately to his mother to rescue him from the fate that awaited him. Refusal was impossible. If he refused to go there, the old lady would simply tell his mother the truth. He was trapped!

"If it's okay with your parents, of course," she added, acknowledging Ben's mother.

"It's fine with me, Miss Oleander-Smythe," she answered. "I'm sure Benjamin would simply *love* to see your house. It's very generous of you."

Ben's heart sank.

She's going to get us alone and chew us out! But if I refuse to go, I am in just as much trouble and maybe more! Why did we ever decide to go there? I am so stupid! Stupid! Stupid! Stupid!

"Well now, Benjamin, I will see you promptly at four o'clock tomorrow afternoon for tea. Don't be late! Good-day to you both."

The expensive limousine purred its way down the street and was soon gone. Ben raced inside, his heart pounding in his chest. He had to tell the others.

\* \* \*

Lizzy and Thomas stared at Ben as he recited the events that had only just occurred. As soon as the Rolls-Royce had gone, he had rushed inside and phoned them and told them to come to The Haunt for an emergency meeting.



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"Why didn't she tell your mum about what happened?" asked Lizzy. "Grownups always seem to love telling parents about what kids do wrong. I know - I have a lot of experience in that! The lectures I've had from other parents..."

"I've got no idea, but she's invited *all* of us to the mansion for afternoon tea tomorrow!"

"No way I'm going, Scope!" shouted Thomas. It was the first thing he had said since the meeting had begun. "She's probably going to eat *us* for tea."

"At least she'd get a good meal out of you" said Lizzy, instantly regretting it.

"You -"

"It was a joke. Sorry! I didn't mean it," she apologized, desperate to change the topic. "Well, are we going or not?"

"What choice do we have? If we don't go, she might tell our parents, or get us arrested," said Ben, in a voice of resignation. "I don't see how we can *not* go."

"I don't want to go!" whimpered Thomas, once more.

"We'll protect you," said Ben. "And if she wants to eat one of us, we'll give her Lizzy. She probably tastes like camel anyhow!"

The three of them laughed, but it was a hollow laugh.



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### Chapter 10: Milford Estate

"What do we do now?" asked Thomas, as they stood in front of the big iron gates. It was just on four o'clock. The mansion house had a name – Milford Estate – engraved on a large bronze plate attached to the huge iron gates.

"Press the button," suggested Lizzy. "Maybe it's an intercom or something."

Ben stepped up to the stone wall next to the gates and pressed the small green button underneath a small speaker.

At least it's a round button. I know what they do!

"Who's there?" a gruff voice crackled out of the speaker.

"Benjamin Wallace and my friends Elizabeth and Thomas," he replied loudly, into the speaker.

"Oh! It's you!" the speaker answered, in a decidedly unfriendly tone. "Come up to the front door of the house and wait there. Don't go anywhere else!"

There was a loud clunk from the iron gates, and one side partially swung open.

"Well, here we go," said Ben, feeling rather unsure of himself. "It can't be all that bad."

The path to the portico in front of the house was long and winding, giving them a chance to see the land up close and in daylight. Ben looked over at the gazebo and gulped. He spotted the loose plank still lying accusingly on the ground where they had left it two weeks ago, in their aborted attempt to search for the third alien room.



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Finally arriving at the house, they walked up the eight wide stone steps between two massive columns and stood in front of the large double wooden doors. Ben reached out to the brass door knocker, but before he could grab it, the door swung open. Framed in the doorway was the grouchy chauffeur, now dressed more like a butler, in an old-fashioned suit.

“Come this way,” he said stiffly, in ill-disguised contempt, “And don’t touch *anything*.” They followed him along a large hallway and into a magnificent drawing room. “Please wait here. Miss Oleander-Smythe will be with you in a few moments.”

He then left, closing the door silently behind him.

“I don’t like him,” said Thomas, nervously.

“I don’t think he likes us either,” volunteered Ben. “He must be the one that saw us.”

The enormous drawing room had high decorated ceilings and the walls were adorned with large paintings and old photos. In the middle of the room were four large antique leather chairs. Suddenly, the door opened and in strode the mysterious lady who had summoned them here.

“Good afternoon, children,” she said, with a broad smile. “It was so good of you to come. Charles, my butler, was not convinced that you would come, but I was sure you would. I am usually a very good judge of character. Please, take a seat and let’s have tea together.”

On cue, the door opened again and Charles the butler returned, pushing a polished wooden trolley covered with sandwiches, biscuits and some other foods they couldn’t identify.



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"Please eat, children, and Benjamin, would you introduce your friends to me?"

Still standing, Ben nervously introduced his two companions.

"This is my cousin Elizabeth and my best friend Thomas, from school," he said. "They are both in my class."

"Delighted to make your acquaintance," she responded, with seemingly genuine affection.

They ate for a few minutes in awkward silence, drinking Coke from crystal glasses – a new experience for all of them. The leather chairs were hard and uncomfortable.

"I suppose you are wondering why I asked you here?" she asked. "Do you know why?"

"Returning to the scene of the crime, I imagine!" a gruff voice said, from the corner of the room.

"That will be all for now, Charles. You may leave us now," said the old lady, without even turning her head. The butler nodded and quietly left the room, shutting the door firmly behind him.

"Don't worry about Charles, children. He has been with me now for over thirty years and he is very definitely *old school*. You know the kind – 'Children should be seen and not heard'." And turning to face Ben, she said very slowly and very clearly, "and definitely *not* in other people's gardens in the middle of the night!"

"We're sorry about that, really we are," Ben offered, as Lizzy and Thomas vigorously nodded their agreement. "We just wanted to look around, and we thought you wouldn't let us."



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"Hmm. Perhaps. But we can talk about that later. For now, let's just enjoy afternoon tea shall we?"

"Can I ask you something, Miss Oleander-Smythe?" Ben asked, desperately trying to change the subject.

"Of course, but I think I know what you want to ask. Go ahead anyhow."

"Why didn't you tell my mother where you found my ID card?"

She smiled and her wrinkled face came alive as she replied. "Why would I want to do that? I'm sure you meant no harm. I'm a very good judge of character Benjamin, and as soon as I met your mother yesterday, I knew you were a good boy and had no evil motives. And now that I have met your friends, I am sure I was right about them as well." Ben blushed as she continued. "But one day, you simply *must* tell me why you were crawling around in the dark underneath my gazebo. The truth though. I'm sure it's a fascinating story, but for now, I am just happy to have some lovely young companions to spend some time with over afternoon tea."

Ben, Lizzy and Thomas looked at each other in astonishment. She didn't seem to care at all about what they had done. "But about my name..." she continued. "Please call me Florence. That's what my friends call me, or at least what they *used* to call me. It seems that I have outlived almost all of them." A look of deep sadness passed briefly over her face. "Miss Oleander-Smythe is so formal. My full name is Florence Victoria Oleander-Smythe - if you can believe it!" she added, with an infectious smile. "I know that that's bit of a mouthful, so Florence is just fine."



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Thomas slouched back in his chair and uttered an audible sigh and a smile of relief passed over his face.

“Are you feeling better now, young man?” she asked, with a grin on her face. “It was perhaps a bit unfair to invite you all over thinking that you were in trouble, but I simply couldn’t help myself. It was just too good an opportunity to refuse. I do hope you aren’t angry with me!”

Three heads vigorously shook in relief. Florence wasn’t interested in punishment. She was simply looking for a friendly chat and some company. They talked about school and weather and all manner of trivial things until she stood up and announced that she would like to show them around the house.

\* \* \*

“This place is huge!” exclaimed Thomas, as they were ushered into the Music Room. “You could fit my entire house in here!”

It was an exaggeration of course, but not by much. The cavernous room had a high domed ceiling and a highly polished wooden floor. It was mostly empty now except for a large grand piano and a small number of large leather chairs.

“I used to sing in here, you know,” Florence announced, wistfully. “My father would play the piano and my sister and I would sing. Oh those were the days...”

“Do you still sing?” asked Ben, politely.

“Not anymore, my dear. I sound like a warbling old lady nowadays!” she replied, laughing at herself. “I wouldn’t put anyone through that! And besides, my sister was always the star of the



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show. She could sing and dance and was an accomplished pianist as well. She always brought the house down with her performances. But that was... well, let's just say it was a long time ago. And yet it still seems just like yesterday."

Ben and Lizzy looked knowingly at each other and the same thought passed through their minds.

Florence must have been here in 1937 when the aliens were here. Surely she must know something! But how do I find out?

"I suppose you are trying to guess how old I am," Florence said, interrupting their thoughts. "You know it's not nice to try and guess an old lady's age!"

"No, no we weren't. We were just thinking about something else."

"It's okay, dears. I am well over eighty years old – exactly *how* far over is another question – and one I will *not* be answering! But I am not embarrassed about it, and nor should you be. Some old people don't wish their ages to be known, but I am not one of them. But let's keep going, I have other things to show you."

She WAS here and she would have been at least ten years old. But how do we ask if she knows anything about the aliens? She really will think we are crazy!

The next stop was the Library, another large luxuriously decorated room literally filled from floor to high ceiling with books. Every wall except one was covered with them. At one end of the room stood a large oak desk, and at the other end, several overstuffed leather couches.



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"This was my father's study and office many years ago," she announced. "You *do* know who he was, don't you?"

Their blank faces betrayed them.

"My, my. What *do* they teach you in school nowadays? My father was Sir Guilford Oleander-Smythe, Chief Justice of the Supreme court," she announced, with obvious pride. She pointed to an enormous framed portrait hanging above a large fireplace on the single bookless wall. "That was my father. He passed away nearly forty years ago now. And this," she said, picking up a single old black and white photograph in an elegant silver frame, "is my sister and her fiancé."

Ben took one glance at the photograph and his heart skipped a beat.

*That man in the photograph is on my bedroom wall! What is he doing here on this mantelpiece? He's an alien!*

"Unfortunately, both of them died soon after this was taken," she said, without any obvious trace of emotion.

"What happened to them?" asked Ben, desperate for more information.

"Let me show you something else," she answered, making it clear that she did not wish to discuss *that* subject any more. "I think this will surprise you."

Ben didn't think anything would surprise him after seeing a picture of an alien on her mantelpiece - even if she was unaware of its significance.



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At least we know we are in the right place. Somewhere in this house are clues to where the other room is! We just have to find it – but where?

Florence led them over to a large leather bound photo album and spread it out on the big empty desk. The first page was a black and white photo of an attractive young woman in a full length formal dress, accompanied by a much older gentleman in an old fashioned tuxedo.

“This is me when I was nineteen. My father took me to a ball with some of his acquaintances and other judges and lawyers.”

“You looked very beautiful,” commented Lizzy.

“Thank you, my dear. That is most kind. But it really wasn’t my favourite way to dress.”

Ben suddenly had a ridiculous vision of Lizzy in a formal gown and nearly laughed out loud. Her jeans, t-shirt, tied back hair and baseball cap were her trademark. The idea of her in a dress seemed somehow not only wrong, but stupid – and highly unlikely.

“It was a long time ago,” Florence continued. “Now THIS is vastly more interesting – at least to me.”

She turned the page. It was another picture of Florence, but this time not in a dress, but rather wearing trousers and a flying jacket standing in front of a 1940s era aeroplane.

“You flew planes?” exclaimed Lizzy, suddenly very impressed with the stately old woman sitting behind the desk.

“I most certainly did! I obtained my pilot’s licence when I was twenty-two years old - much to my mother’s disgust. My father told me to aim high and to follow my dreams, and that’s exactly



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what I did. And so, shortly after the war, I learned to fly and I actually held a job for a short time flying mail around the country until..."

She flipped the page and displayed a newspaper cutting with the heading *Judge's Daughter in Aeroplane Crash*, above a grainy photo of a single engine light plane with one wing missing and a very crumpled nose.

"I was flying into Claremont Airport one afternoon and it was very foggy and the light was poor, and as you can see, the ground and I had a little disagreement. Unfortunately, I lost."

"Was anyone hurt?" asked Ben.

"Just a twisted ankle and a destroyed plane. I suppose I was lucky, but it was the last time I ever flew behind the controls. My father banned me from flying after the accident. But at least I did it! I was one of the few women pilots back in those days. I am rather proud of that time. They were some of the best days of my life. Now, I can't even drive. They took my licence away last month."

Lizzy looked at Florence in open admiration, trying to imagine the woman that sat before her up in the sky, competing with men. It all sounded very exciting to her!

"But I have something to show you that you might find a lot more interesting."

Florence opened the bottom drawer of the desk and pulled out what looked like a rolled up poster. As she opened it, and spread it over the desk, they saw that it was a large aerial photograph of a small town. It was very high quality and in colour.

"Do you recognize this place?" she asked.



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The children looked over the photo carefully until Ben discovered the amazing truth.

"It's *our* city! It's Horton!" he yelled, jumping back in shock. "But it must be a hundred years ago at least..."

Florence just sat back and smiled. "Go on. What else do you see?"

"I can see some of the streets and that looks like the creek and the park," he said, pointing excitedly at the map.

"And what do you think this is?" said Florence, pointing to a large structure just below the middle of the map.

No-one answered.

"No idea?" teased Florence. "Come on, think of your history. Surely they teach you *some* local history at that school of yours."

It was Thomas who finally had the answer. "It's the old timber mill isn't it?" he said, in a subdued voice.

"Correct!" she said, and sat back in triumph.

"But that's not possible!" said Lizzy, slowly. "That place burned down in about 1880 or something, and all those people died. We learned about it in school. *The Ashforth Mill Disaster*."

"Yes... Go on."

"But this map can't be from then because –"

"Because there were no aeroplanes back then!" interrupted Ben, incredulously. "So where did you get this from?"

Florence stood up, rolled up the map, and placed it back inside the drawer.



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"We all have our secrets, dear. You have yours, and I have mine," she said firmly. "But look at the time! Your parents will be wondering if I have kidnapped you! You had better get going soon, but I'd love to have you back again. Would you like to come back again for afternoon tea another day?"

Ben, Lizzy and Thomas were shocked and confused as they rode home. They had arrived only two hours ago expecting to be in trouble, and now were leaving having befriended an old lady with perhaps as many secrets as they had. Or maybe even more.

Their adventure had just taken an unexpected turn.

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The next afternoon Ben, Thomas and Lizzy met once again but this time, inside the first alien room they had discovered beneath the old shed. Their alien mystery was starting to grow bigger and bigger, and they were finding more questions than answers. It was Ben who suggested that perhaps sitting in the place where it had all begun might help them to know what to do next.

"Did you see the picture on the mantelpiece?" exclaimed Ben, as they sat around one of the desks in the alien chamber. He pointed to one of the men in the photo that was usually on his bedroom wall. "It's him! One of the aliens that lived here, and he was engaged to that lady's sister!"

"She has a name you know, Ben," Lizzy pointed out. "Florence. Remember?"

"Oh yeah - Florence. It just feels weird calling someone that old by her first name."



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"And that map too," commented Thomas. "You know there weren't *any* aeroplanes back then, so how did she get a map like that? And I still don't trust her. She's a bit creepy if you ask me."

"You idiot! She's a sweet old lady who wouldn't hurt anyone!" argued Lizzy. She had developed a lot of admiration for Florence in the twenty-four hours since they had met. "She's really cool too. She was flying those old planes back when only you stupid boys were supposed to."

"But Thomas has kind of got a point you know. She does have a map that is a bit like the ones we have here." Ben was holding the collection of photos and maps he had found in his first trip down to the chamber. "Who knows, maybe she's been down here herself?"

"Maybe *she's* an alien!" suggested Thomas.

Suddenly, everyone was quiet, as the thought sank in that the old lady might in fact, be one of the aliens who had lived here many years earlier.

"Well, we've got to find out some more about her and the house. We know almost for sure that the third room is on her land somewhere."

"I think we should tell her everything," announced Lizzy.

"What! Are you crazy?" shouted Thomas. "Is your hat on too tight, Lizard? Is there any blood flowing to that brain of yours? That's the dumbest -"

Lizzy jumped to her feet, furiously clenching her fists, and began to yell. "She already knows! Can't you see that? She knows that we know something! And she's just waiting for us to say so!"



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Thomas backed off, looking to Ben for support, but Ben just sat still, deep in thought. "Lizard, I think you might have something there," he said quietly, while completely ignoring his friend's need for physical protection. He suddenly got up and stood between the two of them. "Think about it. She showed us a map that is *obviously* made by aliens. Why would she do that? And she *knows* that we know it's alien – I think. It must be a huge secret to her, at least as big a secret as this place is to us. And she didn't turn us in to our parents or the police. Instead she showed us around her house and –"

"She *deliberately* showed us that picture of her sister and the alien -" interrupted Lizzy, excitedly. "Now that I think about it, I'm almost sure she was looking at your face Ben, to see if there was any reaction to it. And you went pale too."

"I know I did. I just didn't expect it. I don't know what I expected to see, but certainly *not* an alien on the mantelpiece."

"So what do we do now?" asked Thomas. "Any brilliant ideas?"

"Let's go back and see her again. She asked us to go back, so I say we take her up on the invite. But let's take something with us this time, like a show of good faith."

Ben rummaged through the pile of photos in the desk, and found what he was looking for. It was a colour photograph of Florence's sister's fiancé. It was now time to find out exactly what Florence Victoria Oleander-Smythe knew about the aliens and the hidden rooms.

But something always seems to get in the way of the best of plans. And so, it happened.



## The Three Chambers

If you wish to read the rest of this book, please go to:

<https://abdiscovery.com.au/the-three-chambers/>